

# **BRITAIN AT THE BIRTH OF BANGLADESH**

Thesis submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

British intelligence reports from 1971 describe how Pakistan suffered acute instability after central government forces attempted to quash the East Pakistan nationalist movement, sparking guerrilla resistance, massive refugee flight and extensive social disorder. Much of the British media, political opposition and public sided with the nationalists, accusing government forces of violating human rights, and even of genocide. The British government, in contrast, declared it would not interfere in a civil war with ‘hideous atrocities...being committed on both sides’. While intent on neutrality and non-interference, officials continued deliberating on how to react to the crisis as it evolved. British responses, which extended to aid and bilateral diplomacy, were thus shaped by a number of contextual factors—particularly the nature of intelligence reports from the region, public and parliamentary pressure, Cold War geopolitical constraints and, as expected, strategic calculations of Britain’s interests on the subcontinent. The British position, of course, was not entirely spontaneous nor did it always relate directly to the crisis, but more generally to the post-war context in which the Heath government functioned.

Reflecting both self-interest and genuine concern, British responses to the East Pakistan crisis that ultimately led to the birth of Bangladesh, provide insights into a markedly under-researched episode of nationalist conflict in a former British colony. They reveal the complex challenges that the multi-layered violence posed to external observers, and in doing so, undermine the widespread tendency to cast the violence exclusively as either civil war or genocide. Finally, they illustrate the ambiguities of this juncture in British history when, apparently ready to accept its secondary power status, Britain still sought with varying degrees of success to retain international stature, resulting in a dualistic foreign policy towards South Asia that combined reserve with cautious initiative.

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These are the people who have made a positive contribution to this thesis; I alone am responsible for its contents.

## PERSONALITIES<sup>1</sup>

### **Britain**

#### ***The Conservative Party***

*Edward Heath* (1916 – 2005)

Prime Minister (19 June 1970 - 4 March 1974)

*Alec Douglas-Home* (1903 – 1995)

Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1970 - 1974)

*Peter Carrington* (1919 –)

Secretary of State for Defence (1970 - 1974)

*Richard Wood* (1920 – 2002)

Minister for Overseas Development (1970 - 1974)

*Douglas Hurd* (1930 –)

Political Secretary to Prime Minister (1970 - 1974)

*James Ramsden\** (1923 –)

Member of Parliament; parliamentary delegation to Pakistan and India (21 June - 3 July 1971)

*Toby Jessel\** (1934 –)

Member of Parliament; parliamentary delegation to Pakistan and India (21 June - 3 July 1971)

#### ***The Labour Party***

*Harold Wilson* (1916 – 1995)

Leader of the Opposition (1970 - 1974)

*Michael Foot\** (1913 – 2010)

Member of Parliament; Shadow Cabinet (1970 - 1974)

*John Stonehouse* (1925 – 1988)

Member of Parliament

*Arthur Bottomley* (1907 – 1995)

Member of Parliament; parliamentary delegation to Pakistan and India (21 June - 3 July 1971)

*Reginald Prentice* (1923 – 2001)

Member of Parliament; parliamentary delegation to Pakistan and India (21 June - 3 July 1971)

#### ***The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)***

*John Noble Graham\** (1926 –)

Principal Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary (1969 - 1972)

*Nicholas John Barrington\** (1934 –)

Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary (1968 - 1971)

*Ian McCluney\** (1937 –)

Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary (1969 - 1971)

#### ***The South Asia Department of the FCO***

*Iain Sutherland* (1925 – 1986)

Department Head (1969 - 73)

*John Birch\** (1935 –)

India Desk (1971 - 1972)

*Andrew Stuart\** (1928 –)

Pakistan Desk (1971 - 1972)

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<sup>1</sup> An asterisk indicates officials whom the author has interviewed or exchanged correspondence with.

*Richard Fell\** (1948 – )  
Pakistan Desk (1971-1972)

***The United Nations Economic and Social Department of the FCO***

*Keith Gordon MacInnes* (1935 – )  
Official (1970 - 1974)

*I.K.C. Ellison* (1942 – )  
Official (1971)

**West Pakistan**

*General Yahya Khan* (1917 – 1980)  
President (25 March 1969 - 20 December 1971)

*Zulfikar Ali Bhutto* (1928 – 1979)  
Leader of the Pakistan People's Party (1969 - 1979)  
President (20 December 1971 - 13 August 1973)

***British High Commission, Islamabad***

*Cyril Pickard* (1917 – 1992)  
High Commissioner (1966 - June 1971)

*John Laurence Pumphrey* (1916 – 2009)  
High Commissioner (June 1971 - 1976)

*Peter Smith\** (pseudonym)  
Official (1971 - )

**East Pakistan**

*General Tikka Khan* (1915 – 2002)  
Martial Law Administrator (February - September 1971)

*Sheikh Mujibur Rahman* (1920 – 1975)  
Leader of the Awami League (1963 - 1975)  
Prime Minister of Bangladesh (12 January 1972 - 26 January 1975)

***British Deputy High Commission, Dacca*<sup>2</sup>**

*Frank Sargeant* (1917 – 2007)  
Deputy High Commissioner (1970 - June 1971)

*Arthur Collins\** (1931 – )  
First Secretary Political (1970 - 1972);  
Acting Deputy High Commissioner (June - September 1971)

*Rae Britten* (1920 – 1997)  
Deputy High Commissioner (November 1971 - 1972)

***American Consulate General, Dacca***

*Archer Blood* (1923 – 2004)  
Consul General (1970 - June 1971)

**India**

*Indira Gandhi* (1917 – 1984)  
Prime Minister (24 January 1966 - 24 March 1977)

***British High Commission, New Delhi***

*Terence Garvey* (1915 – 1986)  
High Commissioner (1971 - 1973)

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<sup>2</sup> The spelling of 'Dacca' changed to 'Dhaka' in 1983. This thesis uses the earlier spelling.

**MAPS****A. Pakistan 1947 – 1971**

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**B. Refugee Camps in Indian provinces bordering East Pakistan – November 1971**

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

CAB	Cabinet Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
ICJ	International Commission of Jurists
PEU	Pakistan Emergency Unit
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
SAD	South Asia Department
UKNA	The National Archives of the United Kingdom
UN E&S Dept	United Nations Economic and Social Department of the FCO



**MAP A: PAKISTAN 1947-1971<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://www.clothmen.com/map-of-pakistan.php>. Reproduced by permission.

## PREFACE

This thesis has developed significantly since its conception. A few words on its evolution may be useful to the reader before approaching the work in its entirety. The project, in essence, was born of my desire to learn why the crime of genocide—the intentional destruction of human groups—appears to be a hallmark of our time, and why external powers that might have intervened (either morally or militarily, unilaterally or multilaterally) have rarely done so. My interest in these issues was ignited at an early age, during Holocaust education programs at my secondary school in Canada when students were asked to reflect on the destruction of European Jewry, just as news of comparable atrocities in Rwanda reached us; genocide, it seemed to me during this intense exposure to the subject, was too disturbing a phenomenon, too gross and recurrent a blot on contemporary history, to *not* understand—as was the international community’s failure to prevent or suppress it.

It was with the aim of investigating these twin subjects—genocide and international (non-) intervention in the twentieth century—that in 2000, following an undergraduate degree in history at the University of Toronto, I undertook an M.A. in Holocaust Studies at UCL (the first degree in Britain of its kind), and three years later, the intensive ‘Genocide and Human Rights University Program’ at the University of Toronto. (Both programs had only recently been established, reflecting the growth of the field of genocide studies at the time, and the context of my academic choices.) When I entered for the Ph.D. in history at UCL in 2004, I did so hoping to find a compelling case study on responses to genocide to which I could make a significant intellectual contribution.

As I began my research, attending genocide studies seminars and conferences, conducting literature reviews and writing short papers, I noted with increasing frequency written and spoken references to a ‘genocide in Bangladesh’. Pakistani military forces, it was said, had killed one to three million Bengali civilians during the

East Pakistan/Bangladesh secession crisis of 1971; Western powers, including Britain, who had authorised the contested borders only decades earlier, had either supported the regime or expressed indifference. Familiar with the commonly cited episodes of post-colonial genocide such as in Cambodia and Rwanda, as well as with studies on the role of former colonizers, this ‘new’ case piqued my interest. I wished to know more beyond the said description, widespread in genocide studies circles at the time, and only now beginning to shift.

My search for scholarly accounts produced little. Surveys of the secondary literature on the 1971 crisis revealed that it was deeply politicised, or at best, superficially researched, while analyses of the British response were practically non-existent. I recognized that this was a gap that needed addressing, and that doing so would require extensive original research. As chance would have it, British government files from the 1971 period had recently been made available to the public at the UK National Archives. With considerable curiosity, I entered the archives to preliminarily examine this material. There, I found detailed reports of Pakistani state-endorsed atrocities against civilians, transcripts of British parliamentary debates on the issue of genocide, and records of sources pressuring the government to take action coupled with internal discussions on how to allay such pressure. I had, it seemed, been presented with an opportunity to shed light upon this under-researched case of genocide via the perspective of the apparently apathetic ex-colonial authority. So it was that I chose British responses to the traumatic birth of Bangladesh as the subject of my Ph.D., and set out to examine the issues of systematic violence and non-involvement therein.

However, as I began to engage with the archive material more extensively, scrutinizing the masses of intelligence that the British were receiving, my impression of the conflict as an ‘ignored genocide’ began to unravel. Yes, reports of state terror against civilians did indeed reach the British, but so too did offsetting accounts of

reciprocal violence spanning the spectrum of international crimes. And while the British were reticent to acknowledge those committed by the Pakistan government, damaging as it would have been for British regional interests, officials sought to respond to violence on the subcontinent in other manners, through diplomacy and aid. Thus, rather than the ‘Western bystander to genocide’ trope, which I had been expecting to find, a picture emerged of multi-dimensional violence that elicited mixed responses from British governmental observers, who appeared to be influenced by a range of considerations that extended beyond narrow national interests.

Following significant reflection on the complex narratives enveloping both British and Bangladeshi history which were before me, urged along by knowledgeable readers of my work, I reframed my research questions in a more open-ended manner better suited to the material, that is: How did the British perceive of and respond to the violent events which led to the creation of Bangladesh, and what factors shaped those perceptions and responses? This thesis, the outcome of the developmental path described, seeks to answer these questions with a dense analytical account that documents the ambiguities and challenges the relatively simplistic explanations we have of events to date.

By repositioning myself in relation to the body of data I was collecting, and revising my study afresh on the basis of ever-more open enquiry, I have learned valuable lessons pertinent to the craft of history: to question rather than confirm assumptions, to remain vigilant of ones motivations and conditioning, and to let go of preconceptions that hinder rational investigation in order to present a textured interpretation of the past based on a critical assessment of the sources available. In doing so, I hope to have provided a deeper understanding of this under-examined yet highly controversial period in international history when composite violence was met with composite response.



## I. INTRODUCTION

Britain, in the early 1970s, had just emerged from a twenty-five year period of vigorous decolonization, brought on by the international and domestic upheavals of preceding decades. Its vast empire virtually dismantled, the country under the Conservative leadership of Edward Heath, was on the eve of entering the European Community. Historians have cast Britain at this time either as a state in uncomfortable decline, forced to look inwards and renounce its international aspirations—or, more positively, as a secondary power with changing national priorities ready to concentrate on its ‘back garden’.<sup>4</sup>

During this tenuous transition, Britain was confronted by crises in its former colonies, with which it struggled to contend. Of these, the conflict over the secession of East Pakistan from West Pakistan from 25 March to 16 December 1971 was notable in scale. According to British intelligence, an estimated ten million refugees fled to India and untold numbers died after Pakistan’s military junta in the West, led by General Yahya Khan, authorized its army to put down a swelling East Pakistani independence movement through bloodshed and terror. Reports indicated that Pakistani troops were not the only perpetrators of violence: East Pakistani nationalists had engaged in guerrilla warfare with India’s assistance; they had persecuted local ‘collaborators’ thought to support continued union with West Pakistan, and in turn, had been persecuted by the latter. Communal violence between ordinary civilians in urban and rural areas throughout East Pakistan, what is more, was another discernible dimension to the conflict. Following India’s military intervention in support of the nationalists and a brief Indo-Pakistani war in December, East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, F. S. Northedge, *Descent from Power: British Foreign Policy 1945–1973* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974); Joseph Frankel, *British Foreign Policy 1945–1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); David Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy since 1945* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1990); David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).

Only a quarter of a century earlier, in 1947, the British had granted the Indian subcontinent independence after two hundred years of colonial rule,<sup>5</sup> and sanctioned its partition into ‘Hindu’ India and ‘Muslim’ Pakistan, the latter chiselled from provinces in the north west including half of the populous Punjab (West Pakistan) and the eastern two thirds of Bengal (East Pakistan). Pakistan, a political collage of distinct populations whose two wings, separated by over a thousand miles of Indian territory, shared only a common religion—Islam—was thus created by a British act of parliament. Britain departed immediately afterwards (a departure notoriously followed by murderous population exchanges between the successor states), and following a decade of tentative bilateral initiatives, Anglo-Pakistani relations waned.<sup>6</sup> The Commonwealth of Nations—Britain’s ‘substitute for empire’ designed to maintain links between the British government and former colonies—proved, moreover, to be an ineffective, largely ceremonial forum, to the disillusionment of both states.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the fragile condition of Anglo-Pakistani relations in the post-war period, by the time the East Pakistan question threatened to cause widespread instability, Britain continued to possess a variety of interests in the region. Pakistan, wedged between India, China, Iran and Afghanistan, held obvious strategic value for Western policies of Cold War containment, and both the UK and Pakistan were members of the 1955 CENTO and SEATO pacts to limit Soviet influence in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In addition, Britain numbered among Pakistan’s principle

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<sup>5</sup> The British East India Company governed India unofficially from 1757 to 1858, followed by the Crown until August 1947.

<sup>6</sup> Anita Inder Singh documents Britain’s receding influence in Pakistan in contrast to that of the USA, in *The Limits of British Influence: South Asia and the Anglo-American Relationship, 1947-56* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993); see also, Naseem Farooq Bajwa, *Pakistan and the West: the First Decade, 1947-1957* (Karachi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Stanley Wolpert offers a rich and lively analysis of Britain’s responsibility for communal violence accompanying India’s partition in *Shameful Flight: the Last Years of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 8, 223; Northedge *Descent from Power*, 228-237; S. R. Ashton, ‘British government perspectives on the Commonwealth, 1964-71: an asset or a liability?’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2007): 73, 76, 82; Thomas B. Millar, ‘The Commonwealth and the U.N.’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 58 (1968): 36.

trading partners and a total of 2000 British nationals lived in both wings of the country.<sup>8</sup> Britain was also home to a Pakistani community of approximately 140,000–200,000 members, constituting one of the largest foreign (non-European) populations in the country at the time;<sup>9</sup> a reported one third was comprised of Bengalis, the main ethnic group in East Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> Thus Britain, no longer the ruling power in Pakistan nor even a major ally, still sought to retain influence there, and maintained consulates in both wings of the country.

From the beginning of December 1970, amidst mounting popular unrest in East Pakistan, British diplomats in Dacca, Karachi and Islamabad began reporting to London with increased frequency. In the first week of March 1971, as tensions intensified, Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), under Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home, set up several 'Pakistan Crisis Units' under the auspices of the South Asia Department (SAD) to streamline the incoming information.<sup>11</sup> The multitude of telegrams and reports describe, in considerable detail, the personalities of key leaders in the region and the build-up of political strife, followed by the outbreak of violence between (and within) communal groups, the massive human dislocation and humanitarian crises, the growth of the East Pakistani insurgency, and the actions of the Pakistani army, decried by Bengali nationalists and many observers at the time as the crime of genocide—'acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a

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<sup>8</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), *A Year Book of the Commonwealth 1971* (London: HMSO, 1971), 330; FCO, *A Year Book of the Commonwealth 1972* (London: HMSO, 1972), 340; United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA): Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (CAB) 148/117. 'India/Pakistan: Note by the Secretaries', 24 November 1971.

<sup>9</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/879. Telegram 407 'East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 27 March 1971; Michael Rendall and John Salt, 'The Foreign Born Population', Chapter 8, in *Focus on People and Migration*, UK Office for National Statistics (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), Table 8.2., <http://mighealth.net/uk/images/6/67/For.pdf> (last accessed 16 April 2012).

<sup>10</sup> According to the UK Office for National Statistics, census information pertaining to ethnicity was not requested until 1991. This figure appeared as a 'very rough estimate' in UKNA: FCO 37/888. Note (handwritten annotation), the South Asia Department (SAD)—FCO, 25 June 1971.

<sup>11</sup> UKNA: CAB 148/115. 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 3: 'East Pakistan Situation', 5 March 1971. Records do not indicate the time span between when these units were first proposed and when they began to function.

national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such'.<sup>12</sup> Britain's representatives on the ground refrained from using this term as they strained to identify the different forms of aggression taking place before them, emphasizing throughout how British interests—the safety of nationals, British owned businesses and property, and Anglo-Pakistani relations—were affected by the instability.

Reports, once they arrived in London, went directly to the FCO's South Asia Department. Then, depending on their content, they were copied to additional Foreign Office departments, the Cabinet Office Intelligence Assessment Unit and, critically, the Prime Minister's Office at 10 Downing Street. Edward Heath received copies of key telegrams and regular 'Pakistan Situation Reports'—intelligence summaries compiled for the Prime Minister by regional specialists. Heath initialled these documents, and sometimes scribbled comments or instructions in their margin. The paper trail on East Pakistan thus wound its way across the desks of many junior and senior officials in the Heath administration, ultimately arriving at that of the head of government. Former civil servants agree that the Foreign Office's information apparatus was extensive, reaching policy makers at every level. 'Intelligence on East Pakistan received a wide distribution,' recalls Arthur Collins, the Acting Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca during the crisis. 'These distribution lists were fairly comprehensive—they didn't leave many people out'.<sup>13</sup> 'The information machinery worked well enough to ensure everyone got to see reports,' concurs John Birch, who then worked at the India Desk of the South Asia Department. 'At least twenty offices and one hundred people saw

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (9 December 1948), Article II. The article further stipulates that acts of genocide include:

- a) Killing members of the group;
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Collins (Acting Deputy High Commissioner Dacca, June - September 1971; First Secretary Political, 1970 - 1972), Personal Interview by author, 18 June 2009, London UK, tape recording. When citing government communication on the crisis, I list the main recipients, but for space normally omit the multiples offices that received copies.

telegrams'.<sup>14</sup> Ian McCluney, Assistant Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary in 1971, similarly recalls how '[i]nformation got a very thorough circulation. You could be sure you could always get it to the right people, who if necessary, would act on it'.<sup>15</sup>

Foreign Office officials, it would seem, strove to accurately document the crisis in Pakistan to keep the government abreast of the ever-shifting events and help senior ministers formulate appropriate courses of action. These records have since been declassified in accordance with the thirty-year rule, and transferred to the United Kingdom's National Archives. I have collected and analysed this documentation, interviewed former civil servants, and surveyed an extensive range of primary and secondary sources to assess what the British government knew about the cataclysm of 1971, how officials responded, and what factors may have influenced their responses, in order to provide insights into British foreign policy of the era, and into the complexities the crisis posed to government observers.

I have found that the British government, while receiving reports describing systematic persecution of Bengalis by Pakistani government forces and reports of atrocities committed by various actors, perceived of the violence *primarily* as a civil war, which, in public statements and internal documents, they broadly defined as a conflict on 'both sides'. This perception of events, I will argue, was a 'convenient truth'; convenient in that it served Britain's strategic interest to avoid direct involvement, yet truthful, in that it was based on an ostensibly accurate interpretation of the information available, using a descriptor which was at once reductive—denoting

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<sup>14</sup> John Birch (FCO South Asia Department, India Desk, 1971 - 1972), Personal Interview by author, 23 September 2009, London UK.

<sup>15</sup> Ian McCluney (Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1969 - 1971), Personal Interview by author, 26 September 2009, London UK. For general information on Foreign Office record-keeping during the era, see Martin Minogue, ed., 'Official Secrets' in *Documents on Contemporary British Government: I. British Government and Constitutional Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 254-260, and FCO Historical Branch, *FCO Records: Policy, Practice and Posterity 1782-1993*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Historical Branch, Library and Records Department, 1993). For personal insights into Foreign Office method, see Alyson J.K. Bailes, 'Reflections on Thirty Years in the Diplomatic Service [1969-2002]' (189-197), and Sir Alan Campbell 'From Carbon Paper to E-mail: Changes in Methods in the Foreign Office, 1950-2000' (168-176) in *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gaynor Johnson (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

organised warfare between two parties—but also highly ambiguous, allowing the potential for atrocities of all kinds to be committed in its name. This ‘truth’, as a result, did not adequately convey the full spectrum of violence that occurred in East Pakistan in 1971, particularly systematic acts of state terror.

The British maintained this interpretation of the affair both publicly and privately, and used it to justify their decision, taken the moment the crisis erupted, to remain neutral and not interfere in Pakistan’s internal affairs—a stance consistent with the Cold War climate, British interests and Britain’s own restricted potential for activity abroad. Yet the British response was not limited to neutrality and non-intervention; officials continually deliberated on how to deal with the crisis as it evolved, often considering different courses of action during internal discussions. As such, the range of British responses—which included sending humanitarian aid, withholding development aid, privately urging Pakistani officials to refrain from force, and eventually tilting towards India amidst increasing Indo-Pakistani tensions—was only partly the product of a fixed or predetermined policy. Rather, the government responded, to a notable extent, on an ad hoc basis according to a series of contextual factors that manifested themselves over the nine-month crisis. These, in turn, were indirectly conditioned by Britain’s post-war circumstances of decline coupled with a lingering determination to remain active overseas. It is thus an array of factors, mainly circumstantial but also historical, that served to motivate British responses to the East Pakistan/Bangladesh crisis—responses that are best characterised as both guarded and proactive.

I have arrived at these conclusions using a triangulated approach to data collection and analysis, centred upon archive documents, oral testimonies, and secondary source literature. This multi-method technique has allowed me to qualitatively analyse the subject of British perceptions of and responses to the crisis

from different viewpoints, cross-reference information, and arrive at conclusions based on the intersection (and divergences) of all three. In employing it, I hoped to avoid the pitfalls of shallow analysis potentially associated with single-method approaches, pitfalls that in the case of this polemic subject are quite cavernous.<sup>16</sup> I have moreover kept a ‘highly detailed audit trail’<sup>17</sup> of my methodological decisions with regard to data collection and interpretation procedures, which I propose to summarise here.

In their classic guide to historical research, Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff declare: ‘Technique begins with...[the] catalogue of a library....[O]ne must from the very beginning *play* with the subject, take it apart and view it from various sides in order to seize on its outward connections.’<sup>18</sup> My quest for primary information did indeed begin with the UK national archive electronic catalogue, where I conducted various key word searches using Bangladesh, Pakistan, East Pakistan, and India, confined to the years 1970 to 1972. This produced numerous results in the form of file number references, grouped by date under various British government departments dealing with the subcontinent. The department that held the greatest number of files was the Foreign Office, followed by (significantly fewer) in the Prime Minister’s Office, Cabinet and the British Council.

Over the course of 2006 to 2008, and in 2010, I scrutinized these files, focusing my attention on the departments noted.<sup>19</sup> I frequently rechecked the electronic catalogue to ensure my original searches were accurate and had not omitted any

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<sup>16</sup> Triangulation is ‘a validity procedure where researchers search for more convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories of study’ to demonstrate the rigour of their findings (John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller, ‘Determining validity in qualitative inquiry’, *Theory into Practice*, vol.39, no.3 (2000): 124-131).

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 23-24; emphasis in original.

<sup>19</sup> For thoroughness, I also reviewed material originating in departments that held relatively few (one to two) files. These consisted of: the Treasury, the Department of Technical Co-operation and of successive Overseas Development Bodies, the Medical Research Council, the Unemployment Assistance Boards and the Ministry of Defence. None contained information related to the crisis, apart from a Ministry of Defence file on British assisted evacuations in December 1971 (UKNA: Ministry of Defence (DEFE) 4/263/3. Chiefs of Staff Committee: Minutes, December 1971. Part I, Item 5. ‘Service Assisted Evacuation from West and East Pakistan’).

potentially important reference. Some way into these records, it became clear that the ‘East Pakistan 1971’ search category and its related government departments did in fact hold the bulk of information related to the crisis, be it regional intelligence reports, foreign office policy assessments, parliamentary debate records, press clippings, or letters of protest from private citizens. (Duplicates of some of these were filed unevenly under Bangladesh, Pakistan and India in addition to scores of pages of unrelated material.) I therefore focused my examination primarily, though not exclusively, on the East Pakistan files from 1971.

I reviewed material from the Cabinet and Prime Minister’s Office (PREM) departments first, aware that these, having been read and initialled by the Prime Minister and/or other senior members of government, were most likely to have impacted policy making. I then turned to the vast number of FCO files, paying particular attention to those pieces that the Foreign Secretary had signed, such as the substantial layers of notes prepared to assist him in the numerous House of Commons debates on East Pakistan. I also noted how drafts of these notes, prepared by junior officials in the South Asia Department, often underwent only minor alterations before reaching the Foreign Secretary. Segments of these notes, in turn, usually appeared verbatim in the PREM files, or as part of summaries in the Prime Minister’s situation reports. This bottom-up information cycle, as I will elaborate upon in the text, has contributed to my belief that decision-making during the crisis was, in effect, a collective process in which the civil service participated to a significant degree. This was all the more so, seeing as no government minister appeared to express explicit interest in shaping Britain’s approach towards events, but relied instead on the said information to formulate policy.

As I reviewed each file piece, I analysed its contents on a rational-empirical basis, coding the data by identifying linkages and/or anomalies using a combination of



reason and common sense.<sup>20</sup> I recorded any item of information that appeared to disclose the government's confidential perceptions of and responses to the crisis, comparing it to the positions which senior officials took in parliament, the media, and in their dealings with other countries. It should be noted that British intelligence on the East Pakistan crisis was based almost entirely on indirect information. High Commission officials in East Pakistan, as I discuss later, rarely witnessed the events they described, but relied on a series of informants (primarily British locals, missionaries, and Bengali academics), all with their individual biases who, in turn, relied on others for information. These documents, then, are at least twice removed from the events that they profess to describe and, as a result, are tertiary sources with regards to the East Pakistan crisis. Their central value for this thesis is that they constituted the main source of information that shaped British government perceptions of the crisis and, in this sense, are primary or 'original' sources vis-a-vis the British.<sup>21</sup>

I cross-referenced information from different sources to establish the credibility of each individual piece, noting that there did not appear to be any significant gaps in the files, or indications that the files had been weeded or otherwise corrupted. Documents that might have reflected poorly on the British position (indicating, for example, that the government was obfuscating on the subject of systematic atrocities) were there, as were more mundane administrative records. I also made note of these seemingly inconsequential documents (for example, statistical reports on the condition of East Pakistan's ports and infrastructure) in my aim to analyse a detailed and representative cross-section of the governmental material. I thus compiled a condensed digital archive of sorts, containing hundreds of pages of document transcripts

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<sup>20</sup> Marc Trachtenberg assesses the values of this approach in *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 27-30.

<sup>21</sup> For the potential uses of hearsay evidence, see Louis R. Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 165.

accompanied by my annotations, alongside dozens of photographs of key documents, the most pertinent of which are reproduced here in the appendix.

I organised this material into three categories: by date, geographical location and by subject matter (the last being themes which tended to recur in the files)<sup>22</sup> and subjected this data to further ‘cycles of analysis’<sup>23</sup> using the techniques described. The overview of British perceptions of the nine-month crisis in this thesis is hence organised chronologically, while British responses are largely organised thematically.

Naturally, reconstructing Britain’s responses based on written records, extensive and diverse as these records may be, encounters the inherent limitations of any historical study, that of imperfect representation. Ritchie Ovendale describes the dilemma succinctly:

The primary source, the historical record, is both selective and subjective. Hansard is not an accurate record of what was said in the House of Commons: members have the right to change the text of their speeches. Cabinet minutes, minutes of Chiefs of Staff meetings and the like, are only summaries of what was said....Despatches are often sent by officials with particular objectives in mind and distort the account of events accordingly. It is essential to bear in mind the distinction between an ‘event’, what happened in the past, which is finite, immutable, and unknowable, and the record of that event, the historical fact, which is already at least one remove from the event. What the historian handles is the record.<sup>24</sup>

A historical reconstruction is, in other words, just that—a reconstruction. It can never aspire to be a mirror image of the past. It will be all the more incomplete, given the multitude of private communication and initiatives, via telephone, letters and in person, which are not recorded, have been lost or are simply unavailable. The narrative communicated by this thesis and the primary documents I have cited in support of this narrative, are therefore representative of the archive material—‘the surviving part of the

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<sup>22</sup> With regard to the subcontinent these were: the Pakistan army campaign, guerrilla warfare, army-guerrilla violence, inter-communal violence, internal political developments, other country reactions, the refugee-humanitarian crises, and the Indo-Pakistan war. Information related to British activities in the region emphasised: British nationals, the British Council, property, commerce, regional alliances and Anglo-Pakistan relations. Further themes included: UK policy (neutrality/non-intervention, aid, diplomacy) and domestic responses (press, public, parliament).

<sup>23</sup> Leavy *Oral History*, 148-149; for an in-depth discussion of document analysis, see Trachtenberg *The Craft of International History*, 140-169.

<sup>24</sup> Ritchie Ovendale, ed., *British Defence Policy Since 1945*, Documents in Contemporary History (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 2.

recorded part of the remembered part of the observed part of...[the] whole'<sup>25</sup>—that I have analysed in an attempt to convey the British government's perceptions of and responses to the break up of Pakistan in 1971 as fully as possible.

To deepen and substantiate my impressions of British responses, I set out to compile an oral history of the subject based on qualitative interviews with the remaining parliamentarians and civil servants of the era, whose names appeared in the government records. I obtained their contact details from editions of *Who's Who* (OUP), and wrote to each requesting an interview, stating in general terms that I was pursuing a doctorate on British perceptions of and responses to the creation of Bangladesh. Most politely declined to be interviewed—the conflict was nearly forty years ago and they remembered little. These refusals, often written in an unsteady hand, did not convey the sense of seeking to avoid a discussion on the subject; their professions of failing of memory due to age and passage of time resonated as credible.<sup>26</sup>

Nearly a dozen of those whom I contacted, however, agreed to discuss the subject either in personal interviews, or by post, email or telephone. Of these, two had been based in British High Commissions in Islamabad and Dacca, tasked with reporting on the conflict from the ground, ensuring the welfare of British nationals and dealing on a diplomatic basis with the regional government. Six respondents had been stationed in the Foreign Office in London, three of whom were in the South Asia Department responsible for assessing High Commission reports from the subcontinent, while the other three had been Private Secretaries to the Foreign Secretary, responsible among their other duties for relaying the information produced by SAD to the Foreign Secretary, and if necessary summarising it and providing further assessment. Finally,

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<sup>25</sup> Gottschalk *Understanding History*, 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Armstrong's response is representative: 'Though I was Edward Heath's Principle Private Secretary at the time, I fear that I do not now retain any memory of what he, or other members of his Government, knew or were thinking about the events accompanying the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. I do not think that I could add anything to what you have found from the FCO files in the National Archives' (Robert Armstrong, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, 1970 - 1974, Letter to author, 9 May 2009.)

two respondents were Conservative MPs who had visited the region in 1971 as part of a British parliamentary delegation, while one was a key member of the Labour party who recollected in general terms how the crisis was perceived by the opposition.

Of the many names that appeared in government records, this is a relatively small sample. Nevertheless, as one that comprises people at various levels of the government with diverse perspectives, characteristics and experiences—it is representative enough to constitute an important contribution to the depth of my analysis of the subject.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this element of oral history is unique within the emerging literature on the subject, and as time passes, will no longer be a viable method of research.

In my dealings with the respondents and interpretation of their testimonies, I strove to uphold the tenets of oral history related to ethical practice, authentic reproduction of narrative, critical interpretation and reflexivity.<sup>28</sup> I requested the authorisation of all respondents to identify them by name in the thesis, tape record our meetings (in the case of interviews), and quote directly from their testimony. Where authorisation was not given, I preserved anonymity or otherwise complied with their wishes. In the excerpts of personal interviews herein, I have sought to faithfully reproduce their content and tone through verbatim transcripts that emphasise the ‘voice of participants’<sup>29</sup> and their particular manners of expression. In addition to transmitting the ‘feeling tones’<sup>30</sup> and narrative flow, each excerpt is fully referenced to denote who the speaker is. I have only occasionally incorporated my own voice (in the third person)

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<sup>27</sup> On achieving validity by means of ‘thoroughness’ of sampling and data collection, see Leavy *Oral History*, 138-139.

<sup>28</sup> For discussion, see Leavy *Oral History* (2011); Donald A. Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Leavy explains how referring to an interviewee as ‘participant’ (as opposed to research subject, for example) denotes the essentially ‘collaborative nature of oral history’ where both the researcher and the ‘researched’ participate in the production of knowledge, and where authority over this process is shared (*Oral History*, 8-9).

<sup>30</sup> Leavy *Oral History*, 150.

to indicate a particular question I may have posed.<sup>31</sup> While retaining a due level of ‘scepticism’ with regard to each interviewee,<sup>32</sup> I noted that most appeared enthusiastic to revisit events they claim not to have thought (nor been asked) about for decades. They did not seem particularly practised in speaking about the subject, but expressed themselves with apparent spontaneity and candour, elements that I have attempted to convey in the text.

I was conscious of my own role in the interview process, and tried to influence respondents as little as possible, keeping personal tendencies or assumptions to a minimum by asking a standard set of open-ended queries (ex. Could you describe your official position and professional duties in 1971? What do you recall most vividly about your dealings with the crisis? What were your impressions of British official responses to the crisis?). As many had difficulty recalling basic details about the period, I occasionally showed them documents they had signed in order to refresh their memories, as well as parliamentary debates on the issues of civil war and genocide to initiate a discussion on perceptions of the violence.

All in all, these testimonies provide compelling insights into the information gathering and foreign policy making mechanisms of the government during the crisis, including how decisions were made and past precedents and/or historical analogies were viewed. (British policy towards the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war, in particular, was evoked by parliamentarians at the time as a comparison to East Pakistan, and will be examined in this context.) I have, wherever possible, sought to put individual comments into perspective, thus exploring the macro-micro linkages that ‘convey both the particulars of the participants stories and the larger issues to which the participants experiences speak’.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, the testimonies are distorted by the unreliability of

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<sup>31</sup> The separation of voices is crucial to avoid the problem of ‘ghost writing’ (Leavy *Oral History*, 140)

<sup>32</sup> Robert J. Shafer offers a useful checklist to test the validity of witness testimonies in *A Guide to Historical Method*, revsd. ed. (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1974), 157-158.

<sup>33</sup> Leavy *Oral History*, 141.

memory,<sup>34</sup> particularly with regards to an event that is, by now, decades old. ‘I have little memory of that time,’ one interviewee lamented, ‘not only little memory of the facts, but also of the feelings’.<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding this inevitable limitation, many respondents, independently of each other, provided parallel information on varied topics, as well as incidental or causal statements with regards to dates, events and personalities which coincided factually with government records, thus lending a level of credibility to their testimony (and to the archival documents). Overall, their testimonies reinforce the impression produced by the archive files—that is, just as the latter conveyed ambiguity and complexity with regards to British perceptions and responses to the crisis, so too did my communication with these witnesses of the era.

While archival documents and witness testimonies comprise the bulk of original research, the thesis also incorporates other primary sources: British media reports and transcripts of parliamentary debates, memoirs and autobiographies of senior ministers, published government documents such as manifestos and white papers, and statistical information on British overseas trade, development and defence sectors. (United Nations documents have also been consulted, including humanitarian relief project records and Security Council debates.) I offer my analysis of these at relevant points in the text, based on the principles of primary source critique referred to above.

To contextualise and broaden this study, I surveyed an extensive range of secondary sources related to Britain and to Bangladesh at collections spanning the entire University of London network of libraries, the British Library, and the University of Toronto (my alma mater). My search of online library, journal and dissertation databases (such as JSTOR, project MUSE, Copac, World Cat, UK Index to Theses and

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<sup>34</sup> The debate on memory and history has amassed a large literature. For recent reflections on the topic, see Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004; trans., Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer) and Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, eds., *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Peter Smith (pseudonym) was an official at the British High Commission in Islamabad in 1971. He agreed to be interviewed twice for this thesis but wishes to remain anonymous. (Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009; Personal Interview by author, 16 June 2009, UK, tape recording.)

ProQuest) demonstrated that Anglophone collections in other countries generally contained either similar (but often much slimmer) holdings than those I had personally accessed. To start with, I reviewed the few works that exist on the topic of British responses to the East Pakistan crisis, followed by literature on the crisis itself and its historical background, my appraisals of which appear further on. I then evaluated various histories of Britain in the post-war era. These address British decolonization and relations with South Asia prior to and after Indian independence in 1947, the domestic and international climate of the early 1970s, and the specific policies and policy making mechanisms of the Heath government. The thesis is also informed, though to a lesser extent, by sources on the phenomenon of systematic violence and international responses to such violence.

The thesis seeks to describe and elucidate British perceptions of and responses to the East Pakistan crisis over five chapters. This Introduction (Chapter I) sets out the aims of research, the central arguments to be expounded within the thesis, the range of bibliographical sources used as support, and the research methods applied. This will be complemented by a discussion of the relevant literature, followed by reflections on the three-fold significance of this research.

Chapter II opens with a brief discussion on the rise of nationalism in East Pakistan, leading to a full summary of British intelligence during the turbulent months of 1971. The latter is based on my empirical analysis of the cables that Britain's representatives in East and West Pakistan sent to London prior to, during and immediately after the crisis. While this section offers an original and detailed account of events on the subcontinent supported by written documents from the period (rare in the existing literature), the emphasis here is not on recounting what actually transpired. Rather, it is on how Foreign office officials are likely to have interpreted this intelligence, as they sought to trace the causes of instability in the region.

Chapter III is divided into several subsections, each of which focuses on a government response and the contextual factors underlying that response. The latter include official perceptions of the conflict, public and parliamentary pressure, Cold War geopolitical constraints, strategic calculations of Britain's regional interests on the subcontinent, basic humanitarian concern and the day-to-day practicalities of government. My approach has been to address the range of British responses, whether they involved action or inaction, and to understand the underlying factors and circumstances. I have sought to pay equal attention to the variety of responses, without highlighting any one in particular, as they appear to be interrelated and of more or less equal significance.

The reactions of the British media, parliamentarians, and certain vocal sectors of the public (many of whom raised the question of genocide in relation to the crisis), are also given a limited treatment here. As this thesis concentrates on the acts of government, I have researched how officials perceived the latter through media clippings, letters of protest and other material, which they collected and kept on record. It is evident from Foreign Office files and additional sources consulted, that public and parliamentary pressure did exist, and in sufficient quantities to cause the government concern, inducing them to act more vigorously with regards to development and relief aid, and even to seek legal opinions on whether the violence did in fact qualify as genocide.

Chapter III ends with excerpts of my interviews with former British civil servants posted in Dacca, Islamabad and London in 1971. I have organised these into an analytical framework based on geographical location and recurrent themes in order to illuminate what it was like to represent Britain at the birth of Bangladesh, and why aid, diplomacy, and above all, neutrality/non-intervention appeared to be the most



appropriate options amongst those available, both to the officials interviewed and to the government ministers whom they served.

Chapter IV describes the broad historical context in which events unfolded, over two subsections. The first seeks to demonstrate how the Heath government's focus (and some would say fixation) on Europe and British industry, while absorbing the greater part of the government's attention, did not preclude it from seeking to retain influence in more distant regions in which Britain was formerly active. Indeed, the government's varied responses to the South Asia crisis are but one example of how, notwithstanding the considerable international and domestic tumult of the 1970s, it sought to nourish links with certain former colonies. This the government did with varying degrees of success through small-scale defence agreements and bilateral negotiations, rather than through the Commonwealth, a body that was increasingly seen as a conduit of cultural diplomacy rather than a strategic one.

Britain's fluctuating relations with India and Pakistan from 1947 to 1971, detailed in the second subsection, illustrate how the proactive aspects of the government's responses towards the East Pakistan crisis (particularly its dealings with India) were a continuation of classic British post-war foreign policy, rather than a definitive break with the seemingly more enterprising past. Taken together, these external initiatives and responses reflect the internationalist<sup>36</sup> facets of Heath's premiership, facets which to date have often been underestimated by scholars.

Chapter V, the conclusion, provides closing thoughts on how decisions were made during the crisis and reviews the main findings of the thesis, comparing these to other interpretations of the government files analysed here. To date, I would like to emphasise, these comprise no more than a few scholarly articles. This thesis is thus an

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<sup>36</sup> This broad term is used widely in the literature on Heath to denote the government's foreign policy aims and concerns outside of Europe. (See for example, the collection of essays in *The Heath Government, 1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, eds. Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (London: Longmans, 1996).)

attempt to provide the first full-length academic monograph devoted to the subject—that is, an original international political history of Britain at the birth of Bangladesh, based on an exhaustive analysis of the official records of the former and a wide range of other primary and secondary sources. In light of the very limited state of research, it is hoped that this work will serve as a seminal foundation for studies of this immense post-colonial conflict, as seen from the perspective of the former colonizer.

Earlier works on the subject (of which there seem to be four in total), are based almost exclusively on media reports and British parliamentary transcripts, and unfortunately appear rather subjective in nature. Two make the contentious claim that British governments throughout the twentieth century (most obviously Churchill's prior to the partition of India, but also Heath's in 1971) have been 'anti-Pakistan' as a matter of policy. Kamal Aziz, in *A Study of British Attitude Towards the East Pakistan Crisis*, argues that conventional 'British hostility' in 1971 expressed itself in the government's official neutrality (that is, its refraining from actively supporting Pakistan's leadership), while the Prime Minister's meetings with Indira Gandhi publicized in the British press later in the year, attested to the British 'fascination for Hindu leaders'.<sup>37</sup> HMG's actions, from Aziz's point of view, correspond to a long-standing attitude towards Muslims in India, littered with 'expressions of a deep-seated and vigorously-stated anti-Muslim feeling—which....was a deliberately thought-out, deeply-felt, frequently expressed and long-pursued policy of state'.<sup>38</sup> M. Aslam Qureshi's review of Anglo-Pakistani relations from 1947 to 1976 is more restrained.<sup>39</sup> Yet it too cites questionable evidence of institutionalised British hostility towards Pakistan in 1971, possibly predating the latter's creation, depicted as the cause of immense 'hurt' and 'pain' to

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<sup>37</sup> Khursheed Kamal Aziz, *Britain and Pakistan: A Study of British Attitude Towards the East Pakistan Crisis of 1971* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1974; reprint 2008), 2, 266.

<sup>38</sup> Aziz *Britain and Pakistan*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> M. Aslam Qureshi, *Anglo-Pakistan Relations, 1947-1976* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1976).

Pakistanis.<sup>40</sup> Qureshi's unsubstantiated indictment of British 'antagonism' (and frequent references to a deep-seated 'Hindu conspiracy' in East Pakistan), reinforce the impression that the author is far from objective.<sup>41</sup>

The other two works, while reflecting deeper analysis, are also somewhat problematic. B. Vivekanandan's 'Britain and the Bangladesh Question' accepts Britain's concern for its regional interests precluded the government from firmly siding with one party or the other, and goes on to applaud the latter's eventual tilt towards India (and by extension Bangladesh).<sup>42</sup> The article, nevertheless, written in 1973, contains numerable references to 'bonds of friendship' between Britain and Bangladesh, and gives the distinct impression of an attempt to cement British support for the foundling state.<sup>43</sup> Harun Or-Rashid's, 'British Perspectives, Pressures and Publicity Regarding Bangladesh, 1971', published in *Contemporary South Asia* in 1995, is somewhat more enlightening.<sup>44</sup> It summarises the British stance as one of 'pressure and persuasion', aimed at pressuring Pakistan to reach a political resolution while at the same time seeking to retain influence with the regime by stressing its neutrality.<sup>45</sup> This summary is valid, but perhaps too sanguine in its implication that the British were entirely proactive in their approach, rather than reactive. Somewhat colloquial and overly enthusiastic in tone (HMG eventually supported India because it had 'every reason' to<sup>46</sup>), the article's central value lies in its short but detailed overview of the reactions by the British public, parliamentarians and media to the crisis, which the

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<sup>40</sup> Qureshi *Anglo-Pakistan Relations*, iii.

<sup>41</sup> Qureshi *Anglo-Pakistan Relations*, 265.

<sup>42</sup> B. Vivekanandan, 'Britain and the Bangladesh Question', *International Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1973): 598-620.

<sup>43</sup> Vivekanandan 'Britain and the Bangladesh Question', 619-620.

<sup>44</sup> Harun Or-Rashid, 'British Perspectives, Pressures and Publicity Regarding Bangladesh, 1971', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1995): 139-50.

<sup>45</sup> Or-Rashid 'British Perspectives', 146.

<sup>46</sup> Or-Rashid 'British Perspectives', 147.

author correctly categorizes as largely pro-Bengali, a point which will be elaborated further on.<sup>47</sup>

In recent years, in contrast, a few scholars have published their interpretations of British responses to the crisis based on a selection of the declassified diplomatic files examined in this thesis. I will introduce their work here, and return to them in the conclusion to compare their findings with my own. This structure may be somewhat unusual, however there are so few works on the subject that I believe emphasizing those that exist after a full exposition of my own, serves to clarify the issues at stake as well as indicate the direction in which the newly emerging field appears to be going.

According to international historian Simon C. Smith in ‘Coming Down on the Winning Side: Britain and the South Asia Crisis, 1971’, British files from 1971 demonstrate that Britain’s tilt towards India, which contrasted with America’s siding with Pakistan, did not occur as some have alleged, because the British wanted to differentiate themselves overtly from the superpower, but rather because of ‘the simple fact that British and US interests did not coincide’.<sup>48</sup> This, the author suggests, was a pattern consistent with each country’s divergent approaches to Asia after 1945, where the American tendency to evaluate the region in terms of Cold War stratagem contrasted with Britain’s narrower, yet arguably more effective, bilateral approach.

Historian Dirk Moses, a specialist in post-colonial conflict studies, uses East Pakistan as a case study in his wider study on the ‘diplomacy of genocide’.<sup>49</sup> Referring to the official records from various countries, with an emphasis on Britain, Moses contends that internal and external elites including the British, depending on their agenda, tended to frame the conflict exclusively as a civil war in a sovereign state, or as

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<sup>47</sup> Or-Rashid ‘British Perspectives’, 140-145.

<sup>48</sup> Simon C. Smith, ‘Coming Down on the Winning Side: Britain and the South Asia Crisis, 1971’, *British Contemporary History*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2010): 452.

<sup>49</sup> Dirk Moses, ‘East Pakistan and the Diplomacy of Genocide in 1971-73’, paper presented at the session, ‘East Pakistan/Bangladesh 1971: Mass Violence & The Question of Genocide’, of the *Biannual Conference of the International Network of Genocide Scholars*, Brighton UK, 30 June 2010.

a struggle for self-determination against a genocidal regime. The narrative these elites chose, he argues, points not only to wider moral and political priorities, but also to how myths are created within the modern nation-state system, perpetually divided between the principle of state sovereignty and that of human rights. The East Pakistan crisis, still the object of such myth making, provides scholars with an opportunity to ‘scrape beneath the simplifying slogans’ to reveal the true—and intrinsically convoluted—nature of events.<sup>50</sup>

International relations analyst, Karen Smith’s book-length survey of European responses to genocide in the post-war era, briefly assesses Britain’s decision to refrain from acting against Pakistan during the 1971 crisis, despite Foreign Office assessments indicating that Pakistani forces may have committed genocide.<sup>51</sup> Britain’s policy, she states, ‘reflects the broader zeitgeist, in which the norm of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries (at least in the name of human rights) was considered to be an imperative, obligations under the Genocide Convention notwithstanding’.<sup>52</sup> Smith does not delve into other potentially influential factors, particularly the government’s overall perceptions of events, effectively attributing the British position entirely to Cold War concerns and conditioning.

International relations scholar, Richard Pilkington’s study of Canada’s responses to East Pakistan does not refer to the British position directly, but does make use of British assessments that were supplied during the crisis to the Canadian authorities who had no direct representation in East Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> Pilkington is rather disparaging of the Canadians who, he states, knew via the British that the Pakistani military government was ‘perpetrating systematic atrocities and gross human rights abuses’ against the

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<sup>50</sup> Dirk Moses, ‘Civil War or Genocide? Britain and the Secession of East Pakistan in 1971’, in *Civil War in South Asia*, eds. Aparna Sundar and Nandini Sundar (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), forthcoming.

<sup>51</sup> Karen E. Smith, *Genocide and the Europeans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81-88.

<sup>52</sup> Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 88.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Pilkington, ‘In the national interest? Canada and the East Pakistan crisis of 1971’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2011): 451-474.

democratically elected Bengali leadership and innocent civilians.<sup>54</sup> Rather than condemn what the author frames as an ostensibly one-sided persecution either publicly or privately, Canadian officials maintained that the violence was a civil war and continued bilateral aid disbursements to Pakistan—so taking the ‘moral low ground’.<sup>55</sup>

Taken together, this thesis and the new research described belong to a nascent trend amongst academics from diverse disciplines, subsequent to the opening of Western archives, to evaluate responses to the East Pakistan crisis and the implications these hold for Western foreign policy, the crisis itself, or a combination of both. Historian Christian Gerlach, in *Extremely Violent Societies* for example, uses diplomatic files from American, German and Australian archives to support his original description of the crisis as ‘a landslide of multi-polar violent struggles, in which many participated, one way or another, for protection, survival, or gain’.<sup>56</sup> Gerlach convincingly uses his sources to demonstrate how the violence was anything but sudden, rooted in the crisis-ridden history of Pakistani society itself.

Sharmila Bose, a specialist on South Asian politics, also uses American diplomatic records in her wider investigation into the violence, which is otherwise based on the author’s interviews (conducted in the regional languages) with Pakistani and Bangladeshi witnesses.<sup>57</sup> Bose’s book, one of the first full-length academic studies in English on the crisis, explores major aspects of the violence that, to date, remain largely unsubstantiated by evidence, empirical or otherwise (these aspects are discussed below). As a result, she challenges the dominant nationalist narratives in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, narratives that have largely become sacrosanct components of national

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<sup>54</sup> Pilkington ‘Canada and the East Pakistan crisis’, 468.

<sup>55</sup> Pilkington ‘Canada and the East Pakistan crisis’, 452, 468.

<sup>56</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174.

<sup>57</sup> Sharmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011).

identity. Unsurprisingly, the book has generated fierce controversy, spurring vigorous discussion amongst scholars and the public alike.<sup>58</sup>

S. Mahmud Ali's *Understanding Bangladesh*, published in 2010, draws partly on Western archives to provide a useful 'detached but empathetic account' of the crisis, including a detailed description of the central government's crackdown on the East Pakistani 'autonomist-turned-secessionist campaign'.<sup>59</sup> Ali's assiduous research extends beyond the scope of Bose's in that it surveys the region's tumultuous history dating back to the mid-1700s. His analytical approach is similar to that which I have aspired to employ in this thesis, namely: 'the rational-empirical model...founded on establishing causal linkages—or demonstrating the lack of these—on the bases of evidence rather than instinct or preference'.<sup>60</sup> Willem Van Schendel's *A History of Bangladesh* published in 2009 by Cambridge University Press, delves even further back into the region's past, beginning with its prehistory. Yet when it comes to the 1971 crisis, his otherwise comprehensive account is rather unsatisfactory, being highly descriptive yet not particularly analytical.<sup>61</sup> The author, while cognizant of the various layers of violence which characterised the period, has chosen to focus his discussion somewhat superficially on the 'main thread'<sup>62</sup> of armed conflict between the army and East Pakistani nationalists, rather than delve into its complications. The use of the subheading 'Pakistan's Final Solution'<sup>63</sup> to characterize the military campaign is additionally problematic, signifying a comparison with the Holocaust which requires substantiation. The book, nevertheless, serves as an introductory textbook in English on

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the string of lively comment and response to the book's publication in *The Guardian Online* (May-June 2011), particularly Ian Jack's 'It's not the arithmetic of genocide that's important. It's that we pay attention', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/21/ian-jack-bangladesh-war-genocide> (last accessed 20 March 2012); see also Amber Abbas, Review of *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, by Sarmila Bose, *H-Memory, H-Net Reviews* (March 2012) <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34415> (last accessed 23 May 2012).

<sup>59</sup> S. Mahmud Ali, *Understanding Bangladesh* (London: Hurst, 2010), 55-92.

<sup>60</sup> Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, xii.

<sup>61</sup> Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 161-174.

<sup>62</sup> Van Schendel *A History*, 161.

<sup>63</sup> Van Schendel *A History*, 161.

the history of the crisis for students and general readers—indeed, it is one of the first that can claim to do so.

The burgeoning attention to the subject is welcome. Not only does the new research provide reference points within which to situate my own work, it helps to counter the absence of dispassionate examinations of the East Pakistan crisis, shedding light on the precise nature of events and their wider geopolitical context. These works will thus be cited here wherever relevant, with an emphasis on those that draw on the British files in the conclusion. To repeat, however, such studies amount to a mere handful; the circumstances surrounding the violent birth of Bangladesh, and international responses to it, have generally not been subjected to serious academic scrutiny.

University library collections in the UK, for example, abound with highly subjective ‘analyses’ of the conflict produced on the subcontinent during or just after 1971. Iain Cochrane, formerly a London-based doctoral candidate examining the historical causes of the Pakistan rupture, is similarly dismayed by these early works which, he believes, were ‘rushed through...publication in 1971 and 1972, in India and Bangladesh....[to] garner international opinion in favour of the Bengalis’.<sup>64</sup> Pro-independence by nature, the accounts they relate are similar: Pakistani forces committed genocide against the peaceful people of East Bengal, brutally denying them their unalienable right to self-governance.<sup>65</sup> Pro-Pakistani versions of the conflict, appearing not long after, counter these with their own tales of victimization and claims to legitimacy.<sup>66</sup> This subjectivity, rather disappointingly, extends to much of the current

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<sup>64</sup> Iain Cochrane, ‘The Bangladesh Liberation War and it’s Causes: Literature Survey’, unpublished paper for the Ph.D. Program at Royal Holloway, University of London, 2005, 1-38.

<sup>65</sup> Examples include Kalyan Chaudhuri, *Genocide in Bangladesh* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1972); Abul Hasanat, *Let Humanity not Forget: the Ugliest Genocide in History, being a Resume of Inhuman Atrocities in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh* (Dacca: Muktaadhara, 1974); Sagar Publications, Editorial Department, *Bleeding Bangla Desh: Crime Against Humanity* (New Delhi: Sagar Publications, 1971).

<sup>66</sup> Such as Qutubuddin Aziz, *Blood and Tears: Atrocities committed in East Pakistan by Awami League militants in March-April, 1971* (Karachi: United Press of Pakistan, 1974); Fazal Muqueem Khan,



literature and, although this is beginning to change, consensus on what actually happened during the crisis remains remarkably slim. Thus this literature on the crisis, as it stands, is essentially divided into two camps with a unifying theme: both sides tend to endorse nationalist narratives, and use polemic argumentation to support their respective political agendas.

An important exception is the International Commission of Jurists' (ICJ) legal study of East Pakistan published in 1972.<sup>67</sup> The one hundred-page report 'based partly on published books, contemporary newspaper accounts, sworn depositions of refugees in India, and oral and written statements of evidence from European and American nationals'<sup>68</sup> collected by the ICJ between October 1971 to March 1972, appears to have been the first to graphically describe alleged elements of the Pakistani military campaign, and evaluate these in the context of international humanitarian law. 'The principle features of this ruthless oppression,' the report stated:

were the indiscriminate killing of civilians, including women and children and the poorest and weakest members of the community; the attempt to exterminate or drive out of the country a large part of the Hindu population; the arrest, torture and killing of Awami League activists, students, professional and business men and other potential leaders among the Bengalis; the raping of women; the destruction of villages and towns; and the looting of property. All this was done on a scale which is difficult to comprehend.<sup>69</sup>

The ICJ did not hesitate to list crimes committed by Bengalis and other groups in similar detail, lending their account continuing relevance and utility. Indeed, it is one of the key Anglophone sources used in the more objective analyses of the crisis today.

However, it remains that with regards to the majority of secondary sources produced in the aftermath of the conflict and, indeed, in the following decades, those

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*Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1973); Safdar Mahmood, *The Deliberate Debacle* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1976).

<sup>67</sup> International Commission of Jurists, *The Events in East Pakistan 1971: A Legal Study by the Secretariat of the International Commission of Jurists* (Geneva: ICJ, 1972).

<sup>68</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, Preface, 5.

<sup>69</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, 'The Indictment', 26-27. The British human rights organization, Redress, describes the army action in similar terms in *Torture in Bangladesh 1971-2004: Making International Commitments a Reality and Providing Justice and Reparations to Victims* (London: Redress Trust, 2004), 7-8.

claiming to provide detached analyses of the violence rarely do so in any depth. Hence international relations and South Asia specialist, Bina D'Costa declares, 'the war of 1971 remains one of the most under-researched conflicts in the world, and the traumatic experiences of the civilians after the war remain virtually unknown despite growing interest in nationalism and ethnic violence'.<sup>70</sup>

It is curious why, until recently, there has been little serious academic attention paid to an event of such proportions, and the fact that foreign diplomatic files were formerly unavailable is only part of the answer. Bangladesh, financially destitute and on the margins of geopolitics appears to have aroused little interest in any discipline except perhaps development studies.<sup>71</sup> Nor can the factual vacuum be attributed to a particular disdain for the Indian subcontinent. After all, the 1947 partition of India, comparable in terms of the massive and violent movement of people, has produced an ocean of scholarship and is justly recognized as one of the 'great human convulsions in history'.<sup>72</sup> The second partition of the subcontinent, over a quarter of a century later, has spawned little more than a trickle of non-partisan analyses.

Indeed, it would appear that Partition Studies, as a branch of South Asian history, is sufficiently established to have gone through several waves of inquiry. One such wave was sparked in the late 1990s when the feminist historian Urvashi Butalia argued that the 'particulars'—the stories of individuals, especially of women—were absent from the innumerable political histories of partition or the well-established 'history from above'.<sup>73</sup> Many of her contemporaries agreed, and shifted away from the official archives in favour of a 'new history' of 1947, or 'partition from beneath', based

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<sup>70</sup> Bina D'Costa, 'Marginalized Identity: New Frontiers of Research for IR?', in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, eds. Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 131.

<sup>71</sup> Donald Beachler makes the same point as he seeks to understand why the crisis has remained on the periphery of genocide studies in the United States, in 'The Politics of Genocide Scholarship: the Case of Bangladesh', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 41, no. 5 (2007): 467-492.

<sup>72</sup> Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (India: Penguin Books, 1998), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Butalia *The Other Side*, 3.

on the memories of ordinary civilians who experienced it.<sup>74</sup> Today, still others are combining first-hand accounts with governmental records forming yet another strata of scholarly investigation into the event.<sup>75</sup> In terms of the 1971 partition, there are few serious political or social histories to adopt or to reject, rendering the prospect of it becoming a distinct subject of study distant.

Part of the explanation for this void appears to lie in regional politics; successive governments on the subcontinent appear to have either repressed discussion of the conflict or attempted to manipulate it for their own ends. According to sociologist Nayanika Mookherjee, text books in both Pakistan and Bangladesh are periodically adjusted to suit nationalist narratives, omitting and then re-inserting crucial facts arbitrarily.<sup>76</sup> In Bangladesh in particular, treatment of the 1971 conflict has depended on who has held political power—pro-independence parties, such as the Awami League, or coalitions of those who supported a united Pakistan, many of whom are often linked to extremist religious parties. Bangladeshi academia's attempts to uncover the 'truth'—often government funded—are also 'not innocent of state power'.<sup>77</sup> Each side appears to propagate a competing version of national history that either endorses a (very partial) recovery of the conflict or vies against it. Neither, it would seem, aims to accurately portray events as they occurred.

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<sup>74</sup> Ian Talbot reviews a selection of these works contained in *Pangs of Partition: the Human Dimension* (eds. S. Settar and Indira B. Gupta, 2002) in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2003): 1300-1302.

<sup>75</sup> See Joya Chatterji, 'New Directions in Partition Studies', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 67 (2009): 213-220.

<sup>76</sup> Nayanika Mookherjee, ' "A Lot of History": Sexual Violence, Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971' (Ph.D. diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2002), 70-71.

<sup>77</sup> Mookherjee 'Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War' (Ph.D. diss.), 77; Anatra Datta, 'Scattered memories of 1971: Forgetting and remembering the birth of Bangladesh at Dhaka's Muktijuddho Jadughor' in *Himal Southasian* (February 2008), [http://www.himalmag.com/2008/february/reflections\\_bangladesh\\_1971.html](http://www.himalmag.com/2008/february/reflections_bangladesh_1971.html) (last accessed 23 March 2008).

On the other hand, there has been a torrent of creative literary and visual works,<sup>78</sup> as well as oral histories comprised of personal accounts and memoirs emerging from Bangladesh, and indeed also from Pakistan and India, which far outweigh the quantity of valid scholarly material.<sup>79</sup> Even so, Anatra Datta points out, conflicts in South Asia—a region whose two oldest countries only turned 60 not long ago—are too fresh in people’s minds *not* to be infused with current politics. Thus, while there is a great deal of literature and artistic retelling of 1971, much of it is highly charged, written by participants, witnesses, or those with overriding political agendas. ‘Somewhat counter-intuitively, this wealth of information ends up dramatically complicating the attempt to separate fact from fiction, emotion from reality, and rhetoric from “truth”, in the course of any attempt to construct a nuanced account of 1971’.<sup>80</sup> The East Pakistan crisis on the subcontinent, in other words, exists in ‘separate and parallel histories’<sup>81</sup>: a state-endorsed history or ‘macro-narrative’<sup>82</sup> which props one type of nationalism over another, versus a more complex, but equally problematic, micro-narrative based on individual memories and experiences.

Regional politicization of the conflict has, regrettably, seeped into most of the studies by Western scholars, who without mastery of the local languages required to carry out independent research, are obliged to rely on the contradictory material that exists. This, perhaps, explains the attraction of foreign diplomatic files, and the resulting movement towards more balanced studies. However, in the end, against a

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<sup>78</sup> Mookherjee analyses these at length in ‘Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War’ (Ph.D. diss.) and *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2012, forthcoming).

<sup>79</sup> Notable examples include Sukumar Biswas, ed., *History from Below: Accounts of Participants and Eyewitness* (Dhaka: Mukti juddho Gobeshona Kendro, 2007) and Afsan Chowdhury, ed., *Bangladesh 1971*, vols. 1-4 (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> Datta ‘Scattered memories’.

<sup>81</sup> Bina D’Costa, ‘Coming to Terms with the Past in Bangladesh: Forming Feminist Alliance across Borders’, in *Women, Power and Justice: Global Feminist Perspectives*, vol. I. *Politics and Activism: Ensuring the Protection of Women’s Fundamental Human Rights*, eds. Luciana Ricciutelli, Angela Miles, and Margaret McFadden (London: Zed Publishers, 2005), 227.

<sup>82</sup> D’Costa ‘Coming to Terms’, 227.

background of propaganda and lack of official documentation, many important aspects of the crisis are almost impossible to evaluate with authority.

Scholars, for example, generally agree on the estimates of refugees, as these figures were accepted by UN humanitarian agencies active in the area at the time.<sup>83</sup> Yet assessments of how many died fluctuate wildly between the official Pakistani figure of 26,000<sup>84</sup> to the soaring toll of three million, ubiquitously quoted in Bangladesh.<sup>85</sup> With few exceptions, scholars provide scant evidence for the figure they support, and each seems to define the crisis differently. Samantha Power, for example, in her Pulitzer prize-winning study *America and the Age of Genocide*, cursorily states that one to two million Bengalis were murdered during a ‘Pakistani genocide’.<sup>86</sup> According to Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, in a rare study by Western academics based on original interviews, possibly 300,000 East and West Pakistanis died in a ‘civil war’.<sup>87</sup> Rounaq Jahan supports the official Bangladeshi figure of three million, adding that because many of the targeted middle class were able to escape, the majority of the campaign’s victims were Bengali villagers and slum dwellers—‘defenceless, ordinary poor people who stayed behind...and did not suspect that they would be killed, raped, taken to prison, and tortured simply for the crime of being born a Bengali’.<sup>88</sup> The Ford Foundation’s 1971 demographic study, on the other hand, found that the mortality rate in a rural area of East Pakistan during the conflict sharply increased (by 40%) due, not to overt violence, but to infectious diarrhoeal diseases, such as cholera. ‘Extrapolation

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<sup>83</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Chapter 3 ‘Rupture in South Asia’ in *The State of the World’s Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (UNHCR, 2001), 60-61. For background information, see Thomas W. Oliver, *The United Nations in Bangladesh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

<sup>84</sup> Justice Hamoodur Rahman et al., *Supplementary Report of the Hamoodur Rahman War Inquiry Commission* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 1974), Part V.

<sup>85</sup> Ali recounts the questionable manner in which Bangladeshi officials in 1972 arrived at the figure of 3 million, in *Understanding Bangladesh*, 366.

<sup>86</sup> Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”: America and the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2002), 81-82.

<sup>87</sup> Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 306.

<sup>88</sup> Rounaq Jahan, ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’ in *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel Charny (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 300, 302.

of events...suggests that Bangladesh experienced a major catastrophe in 1971. About 260,000 births were either averted or postponed by the conflict and the overall number of excess deaths probably approached 500,000'.<sup>89</sup>

British files, unfortunately, provide little evidence of numbers killed during the crisis. When these are given, they do not go beyond thousands, a range too low to consider given the breadth and intensity of the violence. These minimal figures do, nonetheless, render claims of above one million deaths unlikely.<sup>90</sup> As the former Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca recalls:

I doubt that it was as many as a million. If you have a million deaths, you have an awful lot of bodies to dispose of...Of course, it was all very unpleasant, but there is a natural tendency to inflate figures. It simply would not have been easy to have a million people dead without more obvious evidence of it...So, I think the number of deaths was really quite small—figures in the million mark have to be treated with some caution.<sup>91</sup>

Ultimately, Willem Van Schendel is correct that, 'In the absence of any reliable assessment after the war...the actual number will never be even remotely certain'.<sup>92</sup>

The frequent allegation that anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 women were raped—a figure of which the lower estimate 'is more than triple that of even the highest estimates of rapes of ex-Yugoslavs'<sup>93</sup> during the Balkan wars of the 1990s—also requires substantiation. However, studies of sexual violence in conflict situations are now prevalent, and the 1971 crisis is gradually being addressed. Indeed, research into women's experiences, the majority of which has been published over the last five years, comprises much of the serious scholarship on the event.<sup>94</sup> According to this literature,

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<sup>89</sup> George Curlin, Lincoln Chen and Sayed Babur Hussain, *Demographic Crisis: The Impact of the Bangladesh Civil War (1971) on Births and Death in a Rural Area of Bangladesh* (Dacca: The Ford Foundation, 1975), 'Summary'.

<sup>90</sup> This is supported by current scholarship. In particular, see Gerlach *Violent Societies* (132-136) and Bose *Dead Reckoning* (175-181).

<sup>91</sup> Arthur Collins (Acting Deputy High Commissioner Dacca, June - September 1971; First Secretary Political, 1970 - 1972), Personal Interview by author, 30 June 2009, Brighton UK, tape recording.

<sup>92</sup> Van Schendel *A History*, 173.

<sup>93</sup> Lisa Sharlach, 'Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda', *New Political Science*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2000): 94.

<sup>94</sup> For an overview of women's experiences and an annotated bibliography of sources on the topic, see my chapter, '“To Know What Not to Know”: The Plight of Women in Bangladesh 1971' (renamed by the editor 'The Bangladesh Genocide: The Plight of Women'), in *Plight and Fate of Women During and Following Genocide*, vol. 7 of *Genocide: A Critical Bibliographic Review*, ed. Samuel Totten (New

sexual violence was one of the most distinctive features of the period; women in East Pakistan regardless of class, ethnicity, religious/social backgrounds, and age were ‘principal targets’<sup>95</sup> of male aggression including beating, torture and killing.<sup>96</sup>

In Mookherjee’s view, the issue of sexual violence and the fate of rape victims in Bangladesh have been manipulated more than any other aspect of the violence, depending on the agendas of the ruling parties.<sup>97</sup> Periods of silence alternated by re-emergence of the issue, she concludes, are products of national political exigency. To this complicated picture, Yasmin Saikia adds the denial of complicity. Females in 1971, Saikia declares, were victimized not only by the Pakistani military, but also by Bengali men whom they knew, to revenge local enmities. ‘Perpetrators were the Pakistani “others”, so the state tells people in Bangladesh. It is an easy, uncomplicated story, until we start investigating. Then the picture becomes convoluted, murky and muddy’.<sup>98</sup>

The uncomfortable fact that Bengalis also committed acts of brutality against ‘non-Bengalis’ is another source of confusion and contention. Indeed, for the International Commission of Jurists, the scale of crimes committed ‘was massive, but it is impossible to quantify them. Figures given by both sides tend to be greatly exaggerated’.<sup>99</sup> ‘Non-Bengali’, in East Pakistan 1971, referred pejoratively to the two minority groups with whom there was a long-standing history of animosity: West Pakistanis living in the province, many of whom were indiscriminately branded as agents of the central government, and Biharis—Urdu-speaking Muslims who had

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Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 47-66. The introduction to this thesis includes adapted portions of the latter by permission of the publisher.

<sup>95</sup> Yasmin Saikia, ‘Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 58 (2004): 284.

<sup>96</sup> Susan Brownmiller was one of the first to argue this in *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 82.

<sup>97</sup> Nayanika Mookherjee, ‘Gendered Embodiments: Mapping the Body-Politic of the Raped Woman and the Nation in Bangladesh’, in *South Asian Women in the Diaspora*, eds. Nirmal Puwar and Parvati Raghuram (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2003), 159.

<sup>98</sup> Saikia ‘Beyond the Archive’, 285.

<sup>99</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Summary of Conclusions’, 97.

emigrated mainly from the Indian province of Bihar after 1947 to become citizens of the newly created Muslim homeland. Hostility between Bengalis and Biharis manifested itself almost at once, after the central (Urdu-speaking) government allotted many of the newly arrived Biharis coveted civil posts in the East.<sup>100</sup> Biharis were soon considered to be closely associated with—and even to represent—the generally oppressive and distant authority, leading to resentment and deepening divergences.<sup>101</sup> When nationalist fervour began mounting in the East, many supported the central government, remaining faithful to the concept of a united Pakistan; during the military repression that followed, some joined the *razakars*, an auxiliary force of ‘armed volunteers’ or local recruits.<sup>102</sup> Hence, whether it was in retaliation for collaborating with the Pakistani army, or for their perceived elite position in East Pakistani society, Bengalis brutalized Biharis during the conflict—and *vice versa*. Reciprocal violence at the local level, between various communal groups in East Pakistan, thus appeared to constitute further dimension to the conflict, woven into the overall fabric of army terror and civil war.

The position of the significant Hindu Bengali minority in the province was doubly precarious: communal tensions with Muslim Bengalis (despite their linguistic affinity) were rooted in the region’s troubled history, arguably entrenched at the 1905 partition of Bengal under British rule.<sup>103</sup> Meanwhile, successive Pakistani governments had branded Hindus collectively as fifth columnist agents of India, the ultimate ‘enemy’.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, Hindus were widely believed to have been working on behalf of India to agitate Bengali nationalist sentiment since Pakistan’s creation. As a result, political unrest in the Eastern wing during the intervening decades was frequently cast

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<sup>100</sup> See Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 11-12.

<sup>101</sup> Shelley Feldman, ‘Claiming a Past, Making a Future: The Liberation War Museum (Dhaka) as a Site of Struggle’, lecture delivered at the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 16 September 2005, [http://www.genocidewatch.org/BangladeshClaimingAPastMakingAFuture9Oct2006.htm#\\_ftn1](http://www.genocidewatch.org/BangladeshClaimingAPastMakingAFuture9Oct2006.htm#_ftn1) (last accessed 12 October 2006).

<sup>102</sup> Jahan ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’, 303; ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Razakars’, 40-41; Redress Trust *Torture*, 8.

<sup>103</sup> Van Schendel describes historic Hindu-Muslim rivalries in Bengal in *A History*, 79-87.

<sup>104</sup> Ali describes West Pakistan’s ‘obsession’ with ‘enemy’ India in *Understanding Bangladesh*, 28.



as a ‘Hindu conspiracy’,<sup>105</sup> and in 1971, Hindus were prime targets of the military campaign (and also occasionally of Bengali mob violence).

Attempts to define these discord-ridden events are, not surprisingly, inconclusive. Some allege that, under the 1948 UN Genocide Convention, the Pakistani government committed genocide against the Bengalis of East Pakistan who constituted a distinct ethnic group.<sup>106</sup> The International Commission of Jurists, on the other hand, considered that the fact that political activists (real or perceived) were singled out ‘mitigates against the finding that the intent was to destroy in whole or in part the Bengali people *as such*. This does not mean, of course, that particular *acts* may not have constituted genocide against part of the Bengali people’ on the occasions in which ‘the intent was to kill Bengalis indiscriminately as such....There would seem to be a *prima facie* case to show that this was the intention on some occasions’.<sup>107</sup> Yet, the Commission clarified, the ‘crime of genocide’ could only be said to have been committed against Hindu Bengalis who clearly belonged to the ‘national ethnical, racial or religious’ groups protected by the Convention.<sup>108</sup> (The Commission also pointed out that although Bengali insurgents and mobs had committed ‘massive violations of human rights’, they did not wish to equate ‘spontaneous and frenzied mob violence’ with genocide.<sup>109</sup>)

The question of how to define the violence has been debated most recently in a special issue of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Genocide Research* (2011), to which the author of this thesis and others currently working on the topic contributed articles.<sup>110</sup> This journal may appear an improbable home for the debate, given that most of the

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<sup>105</sup> For discussion, see Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> For example, Jahan in ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’ and Wardatul Akman in ‘Atrocities against Humanity during the Liberation War in Bangladesh: A Case of Genocide’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2002): 543-560.

<sup>107</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Legal Position under International Penal Law’, 56-57; emphasis added.

<sup>108</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Legal Position under International Penal Law’, 56-57.

<sup>109</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Legal Position under International Penal Law’, 97.

<sup>110</sup> Angela Debnath, ‘British perceptions of the East Pakistan Crisis 1971: “hideous atrocities on both sides”?’ *Journal of Genocide Research, special issue: the East Pakistan War, 1971*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2011): 421-450. The thesis includes adapted portions of the latter by permission of the publisher.

contributors (including myself) do not describe events in East Pakistan strictly as ‘genocide’ (a fact made apparent at a panelled session on the topic at the International Network of Genocide Scholars conference in 2010).<sup>111</sup> Rather, we tend to agree that the multiple dimensions of violence in 1971 fit no easy categorization, and that more inclusive terms, such as ‘extreme violence’ and ‘mass killing’—defined as ‘the intentional killing of a massive number of non-combatants’<sup>112</sup>—are more appropriate, as they encompass an array of acts falling along a spectrum of collective violence. All the same, while adherents to this view (propagated by the ‘second generation’ of genocide scholars<sup>113</sup>) are increasing, the ‘argument over labelling’ continues and, as South Asia specialist Paul Brass observes, ‘is the most debilitating. It is really a struggle for territory, the right to make a claim of utmost suffering and victimhood for a people or to extend the claim to encompass a wider range of sufferers. It is to that extent a political rather than a scientific struggle—for attention to one’s cause—in which historians themselves become enmeshed’.<sup>114</sup>

1971 is justly deemed in Bangladesh ‘the year of chaos’,<sup>115</sup> not least because of the complexity of the conflict and the absence of information on it, but also because of the intense dispute over this information. Given the unsatisfactory state of documentation, writing an authoritative history of the violence is considerably difficult as the lack of dispassionate academic research and ‘plethora of oral sources “recounting” the events..., as well as an equal variety of somewhat dubious official

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<sup>111</sup> ‘East Pakistan/Bangladesh 1971: Mass Violence & The Question of Genocide’, 30 June 2010 session of the International Network of Genocide Scholars Second Global Conference, Brighton UK, 28 June–1 July 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>113</sup> Scott Straus explores why many scholars of systematic violence have been adopting wide-ranging terminology in ‘Second-Generation Comparative Research on Genocide’, *World Politics*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2007): 476–501.

<sup>114</sup> Paul R. Brass, ‘The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946–47: Means, Methods, and Purposes’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2003): 71.

<sup>115</sup> See Mookherjee ‘Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War’ (Ph.D. diss.), chapter 1.

sources...leaves us with more questions than answers'.<sup>116</sup> Nor is writing such a history (or exploring why so few have) my objective, compelling as the subject is. Rather, my interest in how Britain, the former colonial ruler, perceived the violence, what it did as a result of those perceptions (or irrespective of them), and what the implications are of its responses—is an inquiry that is valuable for several reasons.

To begin with, the records of foreign countries such as Britain can be particularly useful in cases such as these where the absence of official documentation and scholarly research is compounded by an abundance of politicised accounts. As described, representatives at British High Commissions on the subcontinent tracked the conflict on a steady basis. Officials, at home and abroad, carefully assessed this intelligence, and cross-referenced accounts to verify authenticity. They also gathered information from diverse sources, placing special emphasis on first-hand accounts; all this they did not only with an eye to protecting Britain's regional interests, but also, as one Foreign Office official wrote at the time, to build a 'historical record' of the crisis.<sup>117</sup>

Of course, using British reports to reconstruct the violent events of 1971 has its limitations, some of which have been reviewed. Intelligence gathering and assessment during the conflict was inevitably complex under the 'fog of war and atrocity'.<sup>118</sup> Diplomats in East Pakistan had restricted mobility amidst the province's marshy topography and poor infrastructure. Unable to gather direct evidence of what was transpiring, they were forced to rely on a limited number of informants—'a few foreign nationals and East Bengalis in the know. These people had their fingers on the pulse. But to obtain really reliable information on which you could base a careful assessment

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<sup>116</sup> Datta 'Scattered memories'.

<sup>117</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/895. Note 'Pakistan: Report from Refugees', FCO—10 Downing Street, 16 April 1971.

<sup>118</sup> Editorial on the East Pakistan crisis, *The Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 1971. The expression derives from Prussian military analyst Carl von Clausewitz' *Vom Kriege* (On War) (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832).

to London of what was going to happen was really quite difficult'.<sup>119</sup> Given these restrictions, British intelligence can, therefore, provide partial insights into what happened during the crisis, and must be considered in conjunction with other sources.

As recounted earlier, this is a task a few scholars have been undertaking since the opening of Western archives. To date, such comparative studies have been based, at least in part, on government records from the United States reflecting the Nixon administration's policy, much of which was published in 2005.<sup>120</sup> It goes without saying that British responses did not take place in a vacuum, and the policies of other governments, particularly those of the dominant powers, had an influence that will be addressed. Yet as a case study, this thesis analyses the policies of other countries chiefly through how these were described in the British files or in secondary studies, rather than by way of archival records from the country in question. It is hoped that this primary focus on Britain will serve those who wish to compare international responses to the crisis, and provide them with insights into the particulars of the British position that are afforded by such an approach (particulars which have not been captured by the slender studies of the British position to date).

On a similarly comparative basis, British files on East Pakistan act as a case study on how governments perceive violence in foreign countries—whether as 'civil war', 'communal bloodshed', 'genocide', or other forms of mass violence—and what actions governments take based on those perceptions. In this case, it would appear that the labels commonly available, in and of themselves, do not adequately describe this multilayered conflict in which various elite groups and ordinary citizens, both organised and unorganised, participated for a variety of motives. This lends weight to recent

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<sup>119</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Louis J. Smith, ed., 'South Asia Crisis, 1971', *Volume XI, Series: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976* (Washington D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2005), available at: <http://www.asiaing.com/foreign-relations-of-the-united-states-south-asia-crisis-1971.html>; for a useful introduction to the collection, see Geoffrey Warner, 'Review Article: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Breakup of Pakistan, 1971', *International Affairs*, vol. 81 (2005): 1097-1118.

comparative studies that employ broad descriptors such as ‘extreme violence’ or ‘mass atrocity crimes’ to East Pakistan and similar cases,<sup>121</sup> in order to highlight the fluid, multi-causal and participatory nature which nationalist violence often assumes, and encourage a rethinking of the black and white descriptions commonly applied.

There is a notable quantity of literature on what governments can effectively know and understand about atrocities in foreign countries, and the relationship between knowledge, perception and foreign policy; studies of *how* governments perpetrate and conceal atrocities—by exploiting language, propaganda and bureaucracy, for example—are equally manifold. Much of this work came out in the decades following the Holocaust, when these issues were explored with urgency, and again more recently, in response to the numerous cases of mass killing that accompanied the last decades of the twentieth century (and, in some cases, have continued into the twenty-first). Although my study of Britain and Bangladesh addresses themes similar to those explored by these respected scholars, I refer to their work only occasionally. I have concentrated instead on unearthing original information about Britain’s responses to a complex episode of state terror and nationalist violence in its former colony, and analysing those responses within the historical and national context in which they took place. I have attempted, moreover, to present this information using lucid and communicative prose. As Bloch wrote, ‘the first tool needed by any analysis is an appropriate language; a language capable of describing the precise outlines of the facts, while preserving the necessary flexibility to adapt itself to further discoveries and, above all, a language which is neither vacillating nor ambiguous’.<sup>122</sup> Such a writing style, it is hoped, will assist the reader to grasp the complex events and intersecting histories examined here.

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<sup>121</sup> Such as, Moses *The Diplomacy of Genocide* (forthcoming) and Gerlach *Violent Societies* (2010).

<sup>122</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954; trans., Peter Putman, Manchester: Manchester University Press, reprint 2002), 130.

Ultimately, Britain's understanding of the violence in East Pakistan, and the Heath government's varied responses to that violence, are valuable for what they reveal about Britain at a pivotal time in its history when, for all the decline and downsizing of previous decades, it remained active in a former colony even as it maintained its distance. Devised on a largely ad hoc basis, Britain's mixed responses do not fit easily into the category of foreign 'policy' to the extent that policy implies a conscious thought-out position on a particular event, often determined in advance, and usually consistent with previous approaches or the ideological orientation of a particular political party. This pragmatic or semi-spontaneous character of the British position was not necessarily disadvantageous. For the country managed to navigate the diplomatic dangers and international instability posed by the affair with its regional interests and reputation relatively undamaged. Britain's activities with regards to the Pakistan crisis may thus be perceived as a case of pragmatism in politics, or what some may call simply 'muddling through'. However characterized, British responses—which reflect both self-interest and concern, as well as an array of related priorities—defy the simplistic categories into which the Heath government has often been placed. At the same time, they facilitate a deeper understanding of this episode of nationalist violence, and the challenges it posed to government observers whose descriptions of the violence rarely reflected its scope or nature.

## II. BRITISH INTELLIGENCE ON THE EAST PAKISTAN/BANGLADESH CRISIS

From December 1970, British representatives stationed in East Pakistan began to anticipate the outbreak of severe political violence in the province. They started laying tentative plans to evacuate nationals in the event of an emergency, and reported to London with heightened frequency.<sup>123</sup> The threat of such violence was not new. Indeed, the concept of Pakistan as a political entity comprising two discontinuous wings had begun to weaken shortly after the country's creation, when East Pakistani elites decried what they perceived as structural discrimination against the East, designed and implemented by the Western-based central government.<sup>124</sup> Disputes over language, economy and under-representation in parliament and the military subsequently became rife in East Pakistan—where 75 million people, over half of the country's total population resided—occasionally erupting in clashes with government authorities.<sup>125</sup>

Statistical data documenting provincial disparity does indeed reflect a state of asymmetry between the two provinces,<sup>126</sup> leading some scholars to liken the inter-wing relationship to a form of 'imperialist exploitation' or 'internal colonialism'.<sup>127</sup> Internal colonialism describes a situation where a dominant 'core group' (in this case West Pakistanis) socially, politically and economically exploit a subordinate or 'periphery' group (East Pakistanis). According to Michael Hechter, the core group then often:

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<sup>123</sup> For details, see UKNA: Prime Minister's Office (PREM) 15/567 entitled 'Internal Situation Part 1—general election, December 1970; uprising in East Pakistan; contingency planning to evacuate UK subjects'.

<sup>124</sup> Gerlach describes the emergence of these elites following the redistribution of wealth and property in East Bengal at the 1947 partition (*Violent Societies*, 124-126).

<sup>125</sup> For an account of the clashes in the 1947-1970 period, see 'Becoming East Pakistan' in Van Schendel *A History*, 105-152.

<sup>126</sup> See Table 1.1 'Inter-Wing Disparity' in Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 31, and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 216-222.

<sup>127</sup> Graham P. Chapman, *The Geopolitics of South Asia: from Early Empires to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2000), 197; Cochrane 'The Bangladesh Liberation War', 1-38; Jahan 'Genocide in Bangladesh', 296; Philip Oldenburg, '“A Place Insufficiently Imagined”: Language, Belief, and the Pakistan Crisis of 1971', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. XLIV, no. 4 (1985): 714, fn. 9.

seeks to stabilize or monopolize its advantages through policies aiming at the institutionalization of the existing stratification system....To the extent that social stratification in the periphery is based on observable cultural differences, there exists the probability that the disadvantaged group will, in time, reactively assert its own culture....This may help it conceive of itself as a separate 'nation' and seek independence.<sup>128</sup>

Before the subcontinent's 1947 partition, Muslims from Bengal and those in the Urdu-speaking northwest most certainly had 'observable cultural differences', sharing neither territory, tradition nor language. Indeed, the sole justification for uniting the two distant regions—religion—was unsound, given the radically different evolution of Islam in each.<sup>129</sup> In the East, the Bengali language and religion were inextricably linked, as Muslim conquerors entering the region from the thirteenth century required the local language to access the population and establish power. Thus, Islam became dependent on "the growth of Bengali as the lingua franca"<sup>130</sup> and acquired significant differences from the Arabic Islam that was preached and practiced in the northwest.

In contrast, Muslims and Hindus within Bengal spoke not only the same language, but also shared cultural habits, trading patterns and folklore.<sup>131</sup> Historically unequal relations and economic rivalry between these two religious groups did not manage to overshadow the extensive links emanating from sustained interaction in a common space. Indeed, according to Naila Kabeer, in rural Bengal 'it was impossible to disentangle the origins of various beliefs and customs...which were held by Hindu and Muslim peasant[s] alike and were essentially *Bengali* beliefs'.<sup>132</sup> Muslim society in pre-partition India was thus fractured on several levels, and while differences may have been set aside in the agitation for a common homeland—Pakistan, they resurfaced after its birth.

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<sup>128</sup> Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 9-10.

<sup>129</sup> M. Anisuzzaman, 'The Identity Question and Politics,' in *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, ed. Rounaq Jahan, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2001), 47-48; Mookherjee 'Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War' (Ph.D. diss.), 46; Cochrane 'The Bangladesh Liberation War', 14.

<sup>130</sup> U.A.B. Banu as quoted in Cochrane 'The Bangladesh Liberation War', 14.

<sup>131</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, 'Introduction'; Anisuzzaman 'The Identity Question', 48-49.

<sup>132</sup> Naila Kabeer, 'The Quest for National Identity: Women, Islam and the State in Bangladesh' in *Feminist Review*, vol. 37 (1991): 39; emphasis in original.



Language is arguably the first issue to have destabilized Pakistan. Indeed, some analysts trace Bangladeshi nationalism to 1948, when the designation of Urdu as the state language prompted widespread riots in the East.<sup>133</sup> To Pakistan's founders, Urdu was the South Asian tongue closest to Arabic and therefore most appropriate to establish the character of the foundling state as distinct to that of Hindu India. An attack on Urdu—which appeared to be manifest in East Pakistani resistance—was thus equated to an attack on Pakistan by pro-India elements.<sup>134</sup> In short, states Kabeer, 'the cultural and linguistic affinity between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal was...profoundly threatening to a state which had only Islam....Reluctant to rely on religious alliance alone, successive regimes in Pakistan embarked on a strategy of forcible cultural assimilation'<sup>135</sup> against the perceived 'Hindu leaning'<sup>136</sup> Muslims of East Pakistan.

The central government, at times, expressed a willingness to reconcile and focus on pressing development needs. Yet inordinate funds were funnelled into the West wing, which (partly due to unequal development of the two regions under British rule) was the main urban and industrial centre, had a higher percentage of skilled labour, and the better economic and administrative substructure.<sup>137</sup> 'From the point of view of a country struggling to maximise its growth rate from inauspicious beginnings,' Graham Chapman points out, 'it would be foolish not to place it [capital] where it would have the highest incremental growth'.<sup>138</sup> However, in doing so, the East suffered chronic decline, reaping none of the major export revenues it generated as the producer of the country's largest export crop, jute, and receiving less than one third of Pakistan's

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<sup>133</sup> Chapman *Geopolitics of South Asia*, 196; Feldman 'The Liberation War Museum', 13.

<sup>134</sup> Mookherjee adds that the demand to recognize Bengali was considered not only a Hindu but also a 'communist conspiracy attempting to destabilise the Pakistani government' ('Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War', Ph.D. diss., 47).

<sup>135</sup> Kabeer 'The Quest for National Identity', 40.

<sup>136</sup> Jahan 'Genocide in Bangladesh', 296.

<sup>137</sup> Chapman *Geopolitics of South Asia*, 197, 201-203; ICJ *Legal Study*, 'Introduction'.

<sup>138</sup> Chapman *Geopolitics of South Asia*, 197.

imports, and only a quarter of foreign aid.<sup>139</sup> What British officials would describe as various ‘half hearted’<sup>140</sup> attempts to pursue a more egalitarian system in the 1950s and 1960s failed partly ‘out of fear that the Bengalis might dominate in a democratically elected government’.<sup>141</sup>

This uneven system of governance soon had the effect of alienating East Pakistani elites and strengthening their consciousness as a distinct political entity, a consciousness that gradually transmitted itself to the wider population.<sup>142</sup> According to incisive studies of nationalism in South Asia, it is not objective differences between groups as such that cause people to consider themselves a separate nation, but rather awareness of these differences, which is generated over time by an interplay of internal subjective and external material factors.<sup>143</sup> In the case of East Pakistan, major differences between East and West predating the creation of Pakistan, exacerbated by decades of government mismanagement (real and perceived), does indeed appear to have formed the background to the growth of Bangladeshi nationalism.

By the mid-1960s, popular nationalist sentiment had mobilized around the centrist Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Rahman promoted ‘substantial provincial autonomy’ and a restoration of democracy to replace the civil-military dictatorship, which had long governed the country by heavy-handed martial law.<sup>144</sup> Political tensions, a consistent feature of Pakistani public life, intensified dangerously from 7 December 1970 after the Awami League won the country’s first national elections, thanks to the votes of the more populous Eastern wing. The central government’s slow and inadequate response to a series of cyclones which devastated

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<sup>139</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, ‘Introduction’; *Cambridge Encyclopedia*, 216-222.

<sup>140</sup> PREM 15/567. Confidential Note, SAD—10 Downing Street, 1 January 1971.

<sup>141</sup> Jahan ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’, 297.

<sup>142</sup> Cochrane ‘Bangladesh Liberation War’, 1-38; Kabeer ‘The Quest for National Identity’, 38-58; for further reflection on factors contributing to a separate sense of political identity in East Pakistan, see Anisuzzaman ‘The Identity Question’, 45-63.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Chapman *Geopolitics of South Asia*, Cochrane ‘The Bangladesh Liberation War’ and Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991).

<sup>144</sup> For a discussion of the League’s political platform, see Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 33-36, 40-42.

coastal regions of the province in November, claiming possibly a quarter of a million lives, had rallied even broader support for the party which accused the government of ‘criminal negligence’.<sup>145</sup>

According to the British High Commissioner, Cyril Pickard, who had been stationed in Islamabad for five years, Pakistani President Yahya Khan had held elections to appease political dissent, having genuinely accepted the necessity of transferring limited authority to elected representatives. Yet the scale of the Awami League’s victory surprised everyone; it had won 167 of the National Assembly’s 313 seats. Equally surprising was the partial success of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s opposition Pakistan Peoples Party, which had won a majority of votes in the West with 88 assembly seats, and was demanding a major role in the new government. ‘Whether Pakistan starts a slow climb to a better order, or a rapid descent to chaos,’ reflected Pickard, ‘depends on the politicians rising above self-seeking’.<sup>146</sup>

Chaos, it became evident, was more likely: constitutional negotiations between the two victorious leaders quickly foundered over the Awami League’s controversial ‘six-point’ political program, which proposed virtual self-rule for the provinces. On 1 March 1971, after Bhutto threatened to boycott the next meeting of the National Assembly at which Mujib was to take power, President Khan suspended the Assembly altogether—‘to allow time for passions to cool and fruitful dialogue to ensue,’ the High Commissioner explained.<sup>147</sup> Tikka Khan, British officials noted, a Pakistani general of reputedly brutal inclinations, was appointed as Governor and Chief of the martial law administration in the province, while military reserves were flown in and stationed throughout the province.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 44.

<sup>146</sup> Pickard’s 21 December 1970 analysis of the elections and speculations on the future of Pakistani politics are enclosed in PREM 15/567. Confidential Note, SAD—10 Downing Street, 1 January 1971.

<sup>147</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 231, Islamabad—FCO, 6 March 1971.

<sup>148</sup> PREM 15/567. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, SAD—10 Downing Street, 11 March 1971; CAB 148/115. 7<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 3: ‘East Pakistan Situation’, 5 March 1971.

These measures, reportedly taken ‘to safeguard innocent and otherwise law abiding citizens’, exacerbated tensions considerably as outraged East Pakistanis, under Mujib’s leadership, launched a ‘Non-Violent Non-Cooperation Movement’ bringing the province’s infrastructure to a halt.<sup>149</sup> The first days of the ‘non-violent’ movement, according to British representatives in the East, did not merit the title; instead, ‘hooliganism, looting, arson and mob violence in a framework of general strike’<sup>150</sup> took place, directed at government forces, so called non-Bengali communities and, occasionally, at Hindus.<sup>151</sup>

Despite the volatile atmosphere, British officials remained optimistic that a political resolution was pending after violence declined at the behest of Awami leaders, and Mujib, Khan and Bhutto resumed negotiations in Dacca two weeks later.<sup>152</sup> Nevertheless, talks soon foundered over the intransigence of all parties, apparently influenced by extremists in their respective power bases.<sup>153</sup> Unable to overcome the stalemate, the Pakistani president abruptly quit the meetings towards the end of the month, expelled foreign press, banned diplomatic wireless transmissions and, fatefully, ordered local martial law authorities to solve the East Pakistan question through force.

The information blackout accompanying the military action, which began late on 25 March 1971, was nearly total. For the British government, however, it was not. Officials at the British Deputy High Commission in Dacca began secretly communicating from emergency transmitters. Their reports were unsettling: the Pakistani army ‘moved into’ Dacca at midnight on 25/26 March and ‘fired on anyone venturing on the streets....[I]nstances of callous disregard for life, with looting, burning

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<sup>149</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 231, Islamabad—FCO, 6 March 1971.

<sup>150</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 64, Dacca—FCO, 4 March 1971.

<sup>151</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 231, Islamabad—FCO, 6 March 1971; Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>152</sup> UKNA: PREM 15/569. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, SAD—10 Downing Street, 22 March 1971; FCO 37/879. Letter ‘The Army Take-Over in East Pakistan’, Islamabad—SAD, 30 March 1971; FCO 37/888. Report ‘The Political Crisis in East Pakistan’, Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

<sup>153</sup> UKNA: PREM 15/568. ‘Record of Conversation between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Dacca’, 15 April 1971; FCO 37/888. Report ‘The Political Crisis in East Pakistan’, Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

and random shooting were actually seen'.<sup>154</sup> Dacca's University campus, considered a breeding ground for resistance, was the first to be targeted. 'Members of the Army...admitted that they are conducting a punitive campaign against "enemies of the people" by deliberately setting fire to property and machine gunning the owners....Total casualties in Dacca are put at about 5,000....[I]ndications are that the Army has planned a reign of terror and that it has so far been largely successful'.<sup>155</sup>

The High Commissioner in Islamabad concurred: 'President....has concluded he can prevent breakup of the country by force'.<sup>156</sup> 'Punjabi and Pathan contempt for the Bengali has risen to the surface and there is much talk of teaching them a lesson'.<sup>157</sup> 'It is clear from reports reaching us that the Army is acting with callous disregard for life and is adopting terror tactics to cow the Bengalis. Political leaders are being hunted down and shot (there is no precedent in Pakistan's history)'.<sup>158</sup>

The aim of the military strategy dubbed 'Operation Searchlight', evident in further cables, was to rapidly quash the East Pakistani nationalist movement by retaking major urban areas and persecuting Bengalis thought to actively support independence; this included certain members of the Awami League, some politicised students and academics, influential Awami League supporters, much of the province's Hindu population (branded 'enemies of the state'), and virtually all Bengali security forces. British reports described how this persecution—carried out using tanks, machine guns, torches and fighter planes—took different forms, including arrest, harassment, looting and destruction of property and murder.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> PREM 15/567. 'Pakistan Situation Report', SAD—10 Downing Street, 28 March 1971 (Appendix Documents 1a and 1b).

<sup>155</sup> PREM 15/567. 'Pakistan Situation Report', SAD—10 Downing Street, 28 March 1971 (Appendix Documents 1a and 1b); duplicate copy in FCO 37/879: 'Political Crisis in East Pakistan'.

<sup>156</sup> FCO 37/879. Telegram 400 'MIPT: President's Speech', Islamabad—FCO, 26 March 1971.

<sup>157</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 412 'East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 29 March 1971.

<sup>158</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 412 'East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 29 March 1971. (Appendix Document 2)

<sup>159</sup> See for example: PREM 15/568. 'Pakistan Situation Report', FCO Pakistan Emergency Unit (PEU)—10 Downing Street, 1 April 1971; FCO 37/895. Minute 'Situation in East Pakistan', Dacca—SAD, 2 April 1971; PREM 15/568. 'Pakistan Situation Report', PEU—10 Downing Street, 20 April 1971

According to British intelligence, however, Pakistani troops were not the only perpetrators: ‘The Biharis (non-Bengali and Urdu-speaking) are on the rampage’.<sup>160</sup> They ‘appear to have been incited to riot by the Army, who are turning a blind eye to their activities’.<sup>161</sup> Bengali nationalists too, it emerged, had attacked non-Bengali men, women and children near Chittagong, East Pakistan’s main seaport. The situation had reversed only when the Pakistani army gained control. British locals, for their part, ‘had been searched by both sides at gun point....By then the Army were incensed over atrocities committed against West Pakistani families and were dealing ruthlessly with Bengalis’.<sup>162</sup> Later accounts would confirm such incidents. ‘Shortly after news of the attack by Pakistani troops on the University at Dacca had reached Chittagong,’ a British mill owner told High Commission officials across the border in Calcutta, his non-Bengali staff ‘was attacked by a mob of Bengalis, who murdered the entire labour force. A few days later they rounded up their wives and children and killed them too’.<sup>163</sup> Having barely managed to flee, Calcutta officials noted, ‘nothing would induce him [the mill owner] to go either to East or West Pakistan again’.<sup>164</sup>

Awami League leaders, in the interim, had gone into hiding or escaped to neighbouring India; as early as 26 March (within hours of the start of the military campaign), they had declared Bangladesh a sovereign and independent state via clandestine radio broadcast. British representatives noted that military ‘reinforcements continue to be flown [from the West] to the East Wing’<sup>165</sup> and Bengali resistance,

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(Appendix Document 4); FCO 37/888. Report ‘The Political Crisis in East Pakistan’, Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

<sup>160</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 1 April 1971.

<sup>161</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 4 April 1971; FCO 37/879. Telegram 167, Dacca—FCO, 30 March 1971.

<sup>162</sup> FCO 37/887. Report by J.C. Long ‘Visit to Chittagong 4 April-20 April 1971’. Enclosed in ‘Reports of Events in Chittagong in April’, SAD—FCO, 4 June 1971.

<sup>163</sup> FCO 37/895. Letter, Calcutta—SAD, 25 May 1971; Also see: FCO 37/895. Note ‘Pakistan: Report from Refugees’, FCO—10 Downing Street, 16 April 1971; FCO 37/888. 28 May 1971 Report by Tony Grech, employee of the Confederation of British Industry, enclosed in Letter, Dacca—SAD, 14 June 1971; FCO 37/888. Report ‘The Political Crisis in East Pakistan’, Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

<sup>164</sup> FCO 37/895. Letter, Calcutta—SAD, 25 May 1971.

<sup>165</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 1 April 1971; PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 7 April 1971.

though ‘ill-organized, ill-armed and unco-ordinated’, was mobilizing with India’s tacit assistance.<sup>166</sup> ‘The Army massacres led to a mass exodus from the city—at least 100,000 of the poorer people are believe to have left, the roads having been filled solidly with people travelling on foot carrying bundles of possessions’.<sup>167</sup>

British representatives in the East began evacuating nationals in a series of carefully planned operations by sea and air.<sup>168</sup> Prime Minister Heath, upon learning that ‘evacuees arriving in Calcutta have spoken of “inhuman brutality” and “a bloody massacre” having taken place’ instructed officials to interview them immediately.<sup>169</sup> These testimonies soon arrived at Downing Street, the Cabinet Intelligence Office and other government departments. They confirmed that several currents of violence were underway in East Pakistan: a murderous state terror campaign against perceived supporters of Bengali independence (especially Hindus, who began fleeing the province in droves), a fledgling civil war between government troops and Bengali nationalists, and clashes between Bengalis and ‘non-Bengalis’, apparently arising from pre-existing ethnic tensions.

In Dacca, one witness reported, ‘The Hindu areas in the old town have been burnt down and many Hindus were being rounded up and marched off by the Army....Some 300-400...were in Saint Gregory’s Catholic School recently and the Army took as many as they could put in one truck to Jagannath College where...they were all shot. This adds another piece of evidence to the stories of massacres of Hindus’.<sup>170</sup>

Meanwhile, another witness confirmed that in Chittagong, army forces had clashed with the Bengali resisters who had allegedly murdered several West Pakistani

<sup>166</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 4 April 1971; PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 7 April 1971.

<sup>167</sup> FCO 37/895. Minute ‘Situation in East Pakistan’, Dacca—SAD, 2 April 1971.

<sup>168</sup> See PREM 15/567. Section ‘contingency planning to evacuate UK subjects’.

<sup>169</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 7 April 1971 (Appendix Documents 3a and 3b); FCO 37/895. Note ‘Pakistan Situation’, 10 Downing Street—FCO, 9 April 1971.

<sup>170</sup> FCO 37/895. Extract 2: Interviewer’s summary of 4 April 1971 account by evacuee. Enclosed in Note ‘Pakistan: Report from Refugees’, FCO—10 Downing Street, 16 April 1971.

families. Now, according to an evacuee, ‘Chittagong...[is] a dead town....The population has virtually all fled. Casualties in the fighting...[are] estimate[d] at a minimum of 2,000-3,000 killed. Many dead bodies lie in the streets, being eaten by dogs and vultures. The stench of bodies hangs over the docks and as the [evacuation] ship left the jetty the wash brought many bodies out from under it’.<sup>171</sup>

A few weeks into the conflict then, the British government had multiple sources of information describing how various groups in East Pakistan—the Pakistani army, ‘non-Bengalis’ and Bengalis—at different times, and in different regions, were engaging in violence. Hence the Foreign Secretary informed Cabinet: ‘The situation...[was] very confused; and hideous atrocities were being committed on both sides’.<sup>172</sup> Only the military crackdown suggests a clear level of organization, enacted as it was using heavy machinery of destruction amidst a state-imposed information blackout, and regularly described by British officials as a ‘systematic’ ‘reign of terror’ against East Pakistanis, with select targets—Hindus and suspected Bengali nationalists.

The assault, however, did not appear to be the opening of a well-planned extended campaign of destruction against Bengalis, but rather a short-term contingency strategy if political negotiations failed: ‘teaching them a lesson’ as British officials described it.<sup>173</sup> Yet Bengali resisters, overpowered by the army in urban areas by late April, began to assemble in the countryside with the support of India, contrary to West Pakistani estimates that it would take only days to stamp out opposition and regain control of the province.<sup>174</sup>

To deal with the unexpected challenge, the Khan administration flew supplementary military regiments to the East: ‘PIA [Pakistan International Airlines] are

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<sup>171</sup> FCO 37/895. Extract 3: Interviewer’s summary of 5 April 1971 account by evacuee. Enclosed in Note ‘Pakistan: Report from Refugees’, FCO—10 Downing Street, 16 April 1971.

<sup>172</sup> UKNA: CAB 128/49. Cabinet Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> conclusion, 5th minute, 22 April 1971.

<sup>173</sup> PREM 15/567. Telegram 412 ‘East Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 29 March 1971; Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>174</sup> FCO 37/895. Telegram 125, Calcutta—FCO, 7 May 1971; FCO 37/888. Telegram ‘East Pakistan: Internal Security’, Dacca—FCO, 21 June 1971.



at present engaged on flying the fifth division of Pakistan Army to East Bengal,' cabled British representatives in West Pakistan, adding that 'Bengali aircrew have been sent on leave...since no Bengali is allowed to handle aircraft'.<sup>175</sup> 'Number of men involved is 18,000. In first ten days or so of April PIA ferried the fourth division into East Bengal amounting to 25,000 men....PIA is operating almost exclusively as transport wing of Pakistan Air Force'.<sup>176</sup> British cables do not speculate on the number of government soldiers in the province at any given point, but random figures cited were always minimal in comparison to the immense local population. Britain's representative in Dacca thus surmised that, 'the Army plainly intended to conceal its lack of numerical strength by a campaign of ruthless terror, killing indiscriminately, and destroying and burning everything it chose'.<sup>177</sup>

Military authorities in the East also began to recruit regiments of local supporters or *razakars*, principally from Bihari communities and groups of Bengalis loyal to united Pakistan. Now in the name of a province-wide 'counterinsurgency', the army and auxiliary forces conducted 'search and destroy' operations in areas of alleged dissidence, targeting suspected nationalists and Hindus, while persecuting ordinary Muslim civilians at random.<sup>178</sup> After a three-day tour of the region, the British High Commissioner's report was markedly grim:

The province is dominated by fear. After completion of main military action, the Army, either as deliberate policy or at initiative of local commanders, set out to harass, kill and drive out all caste Hindus. They have used massive retaliation in response to all incidents, burning villages and killing unarmed civilians. No man or officer is in any way accountable to the law. The civil law agencies have been replaced by armed Biharis who terrify the population and there is a state of complete lawlessness.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/884. Telegram 102 'PIA Flights to Dacca', Karachi—Islamabad and FCO, 19 April 1971.

<sup>176</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/884. Telegram 102 'PIA Flights to Dacca', Karachi—Islamabad and FCO, 19 April 1971; Telegram FOB 191030Z also describes Pakistani Army reinforcements being sent to East Pakistan, Dacca—FCO, Ministry of Defence and Islamabad, 19 April 1971.

<sup>177</sup> FCO 37/888. Report 'The Political Crisis in East Pakistan', Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

<sup>178</sup> FCO 37/887. Report, Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 14 May 1971.

<sup>179</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 421 'High Commissioner: East Pakistan' Dacca—FCO, 19 May 1971. (Appendix Document 5)

Over the remaining months of 1971, London's Foreign Office continued to receive incriminating descriptions of army persecution:

Despite official protestations of normalcy and the relative quietness of Dacca irrefutable evidence has reached me that a policy of extermination of Hindus is still being ruthlessly pursued in area south of Dacca....[D]aily executions...killing, burning looting and raping in country villages is corroborated by missionaries....This wanton military action...has brought widespread terror and can only lead to continuing flight of refugees to India. These specific reports are of course consistent with the pattern of punitive killing and destruction, aimed mainly but not exclusively at Hindus, which has been experienced by the greater part of the province since March.<sup>180</sup>

These were supplemented by accounts of violence at the local level, as ordinary civilians amidst the atmosphere of 'lawlessness' were presented with the opportunity—and possibly even incited—to profit from their neighbours. Thus an informant told the South Asia Department in July:

The pattern of repression was changing in East Pakistan. At first it was the Army who had shot people and burned houses. Recently though they had encouraged the local 'bully-boys' in the villages to hand out justice themselves, with the result that Bengali Muslims out for personal gain had terrorised Bengali Hindus....With the police dispersed, the Army did not bother about law and order as such. They were intent only on bashing Hindus and Awami League officials. Relations between Muslims and Hindus have never been ideal in East Pakistan, and the average peasant would be tempted to take advantage of a situation in which he could chase out Hindus in his area, and seize their property.<sup>181</sup>

Presented with these images of chaos, officials in London began complaining that reports of the military campaign were laden with conflicting impressions, begging the question: who was ultimately responsible? The central government in West Pakistan? Martial law authorities in the East? Or perhaps, diverse army regiments were acting autonomously, according to the wishes of their individual commanders; perhaps there was no single authority. British intelligence supports all three hypotheses, indicating at the very least that the Pakistani army, following the initial military operation, was no longer a uniform body with a consistent line of command.

During High Commissioner Pickard's exchanges with senior Pakistani military authorities in Islamabad in May 1971, for example, the latter expressed surprise and

<sup>180</sup> FCO 37/887. Telegram 379 'Conditions in East Pakistan', Arthur Collins (acting Deputy High Commissioner) Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 14 June 1971. (Appendix Document 6)

<sup>181</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/889. SAD Report (internal circulation), 6 July 1971.

even concern about the army's 'massive reprisals'<sup>182</sup> in the East; martial law authorities, in this case, not the central government, appeared responsible. The Army Chief of Staff in particular, Pickard reported, was 'very worried about the problem of restraining the troops. What I said confirmed all his own worst impressions. He was horrified at the reprisals policy and thought it impossible to justify on any grounds at all'.<sup>183</sup> 'The officers by and large, especially the senior ones, are behaving in a reasonably correct manner and restricting themselves to maintaining law and order,' an informant similarly told representatives in Dacca. However, 'the taste of blood, particularly the easy blood of unarmed civilians and the freedom to loot and rape, has gone to the heads of the Jawans [private soldiers] and NCOs...the officers are well aware of the fact that their troops are nearly out of control and must be handled very delicately'.<sup>184</sup>

According to the Deputy High Commissioner, conflicting impressions existed because army regiments were, in fact, behaving contradictorily. 'It is acknowledged in some parts of the Army that there was some over-reaction on their part....those who admit that mistakes were made are anxious that the Army should try to restore confidence in its discipline and fairness'.<sup>185</sup> 'Nevertheless the Army still faces the problem which it invoked to justify the early excesses—it must use its strength to compensate for its lack of numbers'.<sup>186</sup> And so it continues to try to suppress the nationalist resistance by 'instilling fear in the local populace....On the whole...while

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<sup>182</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905 'My Tel No 421 from Dacca to FCO: East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

<sup>183</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905 'My Tel No 421 from Dacca to FCO: East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

<sup>184</sup> FCO 37/888. 28 May 1971 Confederation of British Industry Report. Copy enclosed in Letter, Dacca—SAD, 14 June 1971.

<sup>185</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/890. Letter 'The Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan' Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 27 July 1971.

<sup>186</sup> FCO 37/890. Letter 'The Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan' Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 27 July 1971.

there seems to have been some improvement in Army conduct the operational reasons which encourage a policy of terror still largely apply'.<sup>187</sup>

As military regiments in the East continued to brutalize the local population, while a few attempted to restore order, the Khan government in the West took some measures to normalise the situation. In June, representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were permitted entry to plan a large-scale relief effort, establishing an embryonic international presence in the province. The ban on foreign media was lifted at the same time. 'The great thing now,' exclaimed the British Foreign Secretary to Parliament, 'is that journalists will be able to move freely about East Pakistan, and we should, therefore, get a balanced picture. It has been very difficult to establish the facts before'.<sup>188</sup> Khan also professed in a nationwide broadcast that he was 'conscious of the legitimate demands of the East Pakistanis', and would resume transferring power to a civilian government by holding fresh elections (barring, that is, politicians who had engaged in 'anti-state activities'). 'Normalcy,' he declared, '...can never return to a country without full participation of the people in its administration'.<sup>189</sup>

As it turned out, new elections were never held, army terror tactics in the East continued and Khan's public assurances, officials in London later noted, 'had virtually no effect'.<sup>190</sup> The Dacca representative's report captured the situation:

The MLA [Martial Law Authority] appears to have grossly misjudged the public reaction to the excesses it felt bound, or just wanted, to commit at the time....[It] may seek to induce a return to 'normality', but that does not prevent it from continuing to kill freely and openly; armed Bihari irregulars continue to do the work of the Army, terrorising the Bengalis and slaughtering the Hindus. As I write this despatch, reports reach me daily of continued killings on a large scale, of wanton destruction of villages

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<sup>187</sup> FCO 37/890. Letter 'The Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan' Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 27 July 1971.

<sup>188</sup> FCO 37/888. British Foreign Secretary, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, col. 1441, 23 June 1971.

<sup>189</sup> FCO 37/889. Transcript of Yahya Khan's Address in English to the Nation, Press Information Dept, Government of Pakistan—FCO, 28 June 1971.

<sup>190</sup> FCO 37/889. 'Pakistan: Note for the Secretary of State's Use in Cabinet on 8 July' (handwritten annotation), SAD—FCO, 7 July 1971.

and of widespread looting. The MLA has so far shown itself to be unaware of any contradictions in this 'policy'.<sup>191</sup>

Ineffective as the President's initiatives turned out to be, the British government remained convinced that they reflected a genuine desire on behalf of Pakistan's leadership to reinstate peace to the province. Moreover, the multiple forms of government and military behaviour strongly indicated that Pakistani authorities, while guilty of systematic persecution, had not prepared a long-term campaign of destruction against Bengalis. Instead, the leadership appeared to have adopted an improvised approach—brutal but inconsistent—to dealing with unrest in East Pakistan, unrest intensified by the fact that various parties were engaging in violence. Hence, the Dacca representative's assessment that a 'civil war has been waged with murderous severity' appeared disturbingly apposite, as 'each day of killing, of non-Bengalis by Bengalis, of Bengalis by non-Bengalis, merely stores up a darker future of more atrocities'.<sup>192</sup>

By the middle of the year, Downing Street began shifting its attention to the increasing danger to regional security, as millions of refugees gathered in overcrowded camps along India's northeastern border, and military tension between India and Pakistan mounted.<sup>193</sup> According to a confidential report by United Nations officials sent to the Foreign Office, '[t]he refugees are in a pathetic state. They are stunned and shocked by what has happened, what they have seen and heard, and their present plight and circumstances. They are dejected and demoralized....a number are expressionless and unable to talk of their recent experiences'.<sup>194</sup>

Meanwhile a British parliamentary delegation of four MPs, Arthur Bottomley and Reginald Prentice (Labour), and Toby Jessel and James Ramsden (Conservative),

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<sup>191</sup> FCO 37/888. Report 'The Political Crisis in East Pakistan', Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971.

<sup>192</sup> FCO 37/888. Report 'The Political Crisis in East Pakistan', Dacca—FCO, 5 June 1971; FCO 37/883. Report, Dacca—SAD and FCO, 14 April 1971.

<sup>193</sup> For a detailed description of Indo-Pakistani tensions during this period, see PREM 15/569. Telegram 1415, Islamabad—FCO, 8 July 1971 and Telegram 1750, New Delhi—FCO, 9 July 1971.

<sup>194</sup> 'General condition of migrants' in UNHCR Report entitled 'Mission to India by UNHCR Three Man Team', 5-19 May 1971 (source: Toby Jessel, former Conservative MP and member of parliamentary delegation to Pakistan and India from 21 June - 3 July 1971, Personal Papers).

had returned to London after visiting both wings of Pakistan and India's refugee camps from June to July. The situation, they told the Foreign Office, was grave: the army's terror campaign in East Pakistan continued, prompting an unending stream of refugees into India; in such circumstances, a political resolution was unlikely.<sup>195</sup> As one delegate recounted in the press:

We left Rawalpindi with a personal assurance from President Yahya Khan that we could go where we liked and see what we like in East Pakistan. It soon became clear just how much and just how little this meant....Wherever we went, we were on a conducted tour in the hands of the regime...listening to the official point of view....Nobody would admit publicly that the Army had committed excesses.... Any temptation to accept the smallest part of the Pakistan version would have been swept away by the awful reality of what is happening....People were shot or mutilated, houses and farms burned. Women were raped, the soldiers had looted, or encouraged the non-Bengalis to loot the Bengalis (and especially the Hindus). This was still happening.<sup>196</sup>

Amidst the turbulence, UN Security Council members had thus far remained silent<sup>197</sup>—paralysed by the tension between Soviet-backed India and a Pakistan firmly supported by the Nixon administration. On 20 July 1971, in an unusual step, Secretary General U Thant personally appealed to the Council:

The time is past when the international community can continue to stand by, watching the situation deteriorate and hoping that relief programmes, humanitarian efforts and good intentions will be enough to turn the tide of human misery and potential disaster. I am deeply concerned about the possible consequences of the present situation, not only in the humanitarian sense, but also as potential threat to international peace and security.<sup>198</sup>

Both the Foreign Office and Cabinet began swiftly assessing Britain's options should violence in East Pakistan, until then viewed as a strictly internal affair, lead to international war and Security Council intervention. Prime Minister Heath, acutely aware that 'the rot which started in East Bengal may spread even more widely

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<sup>195</sup> FCO 37/889. 'Pakistan: Note for Secretary of State's Use in Cabinet on 15 July', SAD—FCO, 14 July 1971; PREM 15/569. Telegram 1610 'Parliamentary Delegation', New Delhi—FCO, 1 July 1971.

<sup>196</sup> Reginald Prentice (Labour MP for East Ham North, 1957-1974), 'Both Sides of Disaster', *New Statesman* (London), 16 July 1971. Reprinted in *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revd. and enlrgd., eds. Sheelendra Singh et al. (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999, 569-571.

<sup>197</sup> The Security Council in 1971 was composed of (permanent members) Britain, China, France, USA and the USSR and (non-permanent members) Argentina, Burundi, Belgium, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Poland, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Syria.

<sup>198</sup> U Thant's memorandum, as quoted in FCO 37/890. 'Pakistan: Note for the Secretary of State's Use in Cabinet', SAD—FCO, 27 July 1971.

throughout the sub-continent',<sup>199</sup> asked the Foreign Secretary to keep the situation 'under particularly close review'.<sup>200</sup>

Officials in London, all the while, continued receiving reports written in what they agreed was a 'bleak' and 'highly depressing'<sup>201</sup> strain: 'The situation in East Pakistan remains unsettled. The guerrillas, supported from India, are becoming more effective and the Pakistan Army and irregulars continue punitive attacks on the local population. Life is disrupted, communications are broken, the economy stagnating and the danger of famine growing'.<sup>202</sup> 'From information which we have received...it is pretty clear that the flow of refugees has not yet stopped, much less been reversed....Continuing excesses by the Army are preventing any significant return to Pakistan'.<sup>203</sup>

British files on East Pakistan, during the final tense months of 1971, swell with policy papers assessing how Britain could avert war on the subcontinent. As a senior official advised the Prime Minister, Britain must now 'cope only with the most immediate risk, i.e. the risk of an outbreak of war between India and Pakistan....[I]f we do not act soon, we may well be too late to make any contribution to averting disaster'.<sup>204</sup> On the whole, preventing hostilities was in Britain's immediate national interests: 'We can scarcely afford to contemplate sub-continental war, even in terms of British commercial interests, to say nothing of moral responsibility....We are already

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<sup>199</sup> PREM 15/569. 'Notes for PM on upcoming Cabinet Defence and Overseas Committee Meeting', 28 July 1971.

<sup>200</sup> CAB 148/115. Cabinet Defence and Overseas Policy Committee 17<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 4: 'Pakistan' ('PM Summary'), 29 July 1971.

<sup>201</sup> Foreign Office officials' handwritten annotations on cover note to PREM 15/569. Secret Memorandum 'East Pakistan', FCO—10 Downing Street, 4 October 1971.

<sup>202</sup> FCO 37/890. Report 'Bangladesh', Calcutta—New Delhi and FCO, 8 July 1971; FCO 37/890. Report '“Bangladesh” Commitment to “All-Out War”', Calcutta—New Delhi and FCO, 19 July 1971.

<sup>203</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 27 October 1971.

<sup>204</sup> PREM 15/569. Note 'India and Pakistan (Defence Overseas Policy (DOP) (71) 66)', Cabinet Secretary—PM, 19 October 1971.

paying, quite literally, for the West Pakistani excesses of last March; the relief bill after a major sub-continental war would be immensely greater'.<sup>205</sup>

Britain's Cabinet Defence Committee, for its part, carefully weighed the merits of pressing for UN intervention either in the form of mediation, observer missions or peacekeeping forces.<sup>206</sup> The Committee consistently concluded that for Britain alone to promote any initiative 'would be fruitless...unless we had some degree of support from the other permanent members'.<sup>207</sup> Conscious of Britain's restricted capabilities, the Prime Minister agreed—'it was apparent that there was no immediate action we could take which was likely to improve the situation. As regards possible action by the United Nations the paralysis of the Security Council in the present situation was clear'.<sup>208</sup>

Silence at the Security Council was finally shattered on 3 December 1971, when Indian military jets began bombing both wings of Pakistan, in response to the latter's 'pre-emptive strike' against north-western Indian bases.<sup>209</sup> Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN declared at the Security Council that India was the aggressor, and must be stopped—"no political, economic, strategic, social or ideological considerations may be invoked by one state to justify its interference in the internal affairs of another state".<sup>210</sup> Over the next two weeks, Council members submitted cease-fire resolutions generally

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<sup>205</sup> PREM 15/569. Note 'India and Pakistan (Defence Overseas Policy (DOP) (71) 66)', Cabinet Secretary—PM, 19 October 1971.

<sup>206</sup> CAB 148/117. 'India and Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs', 18 October 1971; CAB 148/117. 'India/Pakistan: Note by the Secretaries', 24 November 1971; CAB 148/115. 22nd Meeting, Item No 1: 'India/Pakistan', 30 November 1971; CAB 148/115. 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 1: 'India/Pakistan', 7 December 1971; CAB 148/115. 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 1: 'India/Pakistan', 14 December 1971; CAB 148/115. 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 2: 'India/Pakistan', 15 December 1971.

<sup>207</sup> CAB 148/117. 'India and Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs', 18 October 1971.

<sup>208</sup> CAB 148/115. 22nd Meeting, Item No 1: 'India/Pakistan' ('PM summary'), 30 November 1971.

<sup>209</sup> For a description of the military hostilities immediately prior to the Indo-Pakistani war, see Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 55-77.

<sup>210</sup> Security Council 1606th Meeting, 4 December 1971, as quoted in Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 65. Both India and Pakistan were invited to participate in Council deliberations in accordance with the UN Charter (Chapter V, Article 31), which permits any state to 'participate, without vote, in the discussion of any question brought before the Security Council whenever the latter considers that the interests of that member are specially affected'.



condemning India's action in a series of emergency meetings; the USSR vetoed each one. HMG abstained from voting 'on the grounds that any resolution which was unacceptable to the Security Council and to the parties...was worthless in practical terms'.<sup>211</sup>

During these final months, British officials continued to receive reports describing vicious acts of violence committed by various parties in East Pakistan. One particularly graphic account documented acts of torture purportedly inflicted by West Pakistani security forces on suspected Bengali nationalists, ranging from adolescents to the elderly.<sup>212</sup> Another, a pooled report written by British journalists in the region and sent by the Deputy High Commission, describes a systematic attack on Bengali professionals during the final days of the Indo-Pakistani war, allegedly carried out by Bengali paramilitary groups loyal to Pakistan. (British representatives on the ground generally sought to distance themselves from media coverage of the crisis, which they viewed as an obstacle to political resolution and a potential catalyst of anti-British sentiment. In this case, journalists suspected that Pakistani authorities were blocking their communication, so the Deputy High Commission agreed to transmit the report to London using diplomatic channels.)

Cream of country's intellectuals who should now be helping create infant state of Bangla Desh were found today, bayoneted garrotted or shot dead in a brickfield outside Dacca. At least 125 doctors professors writers and teachers lay face down in blood red pools of water, all with their hands tied behind their backs.....Intellectuals were coldly executed about four days ago. Most were arrested in their homes two days before Pakistan surrendered because they were leading opponents of Islamabad.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> CAB 148/115. 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Item No 1: 'India/Pakistan' (Summary of Foreign Secretary's Report), 14 December 1971.

<sup>212</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/897 entitled 'Civil Unrest in East Pakistan'. Report 'Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 29 November 1971. (Appendix Documents 13a and 13b)

<sup>213</sup> UKNA: FCO 26/845 entitled 'News Items on East and West Pakistan'. Telegram 929, Dacca—FCO, 18 December 1971 (Appendix Document 14). This incident is also described in FCO 37/897. Telegram 725, Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 18 December 1971: 'There is an unpleasant report today of piles of bodies discovered in the brickfields on the western edge of the city. This is graphically described in MIFT. The figure quoted of 150 is probably an over estimate but Robson (BBC) says he personally saw at least 40.'

After Pakistan surrendered to Indian forces on 16 December 1971, the Security Council finally managed to issue a resolution calling for a durable ceasefire and the retreat of all armed forces to their own territories.<sup>214</sup> East Pakistan, within weeks, was internationally recognized as the state of Bangladesh.

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<sup>214</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 307, 21 December 1971.

### III. BRITISH RESPONSES: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

#### i. DIPLOMACY

The British government's immediate reaction to the Pakistani military crackdown in the spring of 1971 was to communicate Britain's neutrality and strict intention not to interfere. "The government had absolutely no proposals for intervention in the conflict," Edward Heath declared at a public gathering two days after the military crackdown. "Pakistan is a completely independent sovereign country, a member of the commonwealth and we must all regret immensely the strife taking place".<sup>215</sup> While 'regretting the loss of life in Pakistan,' Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home similarly informed the House of Commons on 29 March 1971, '...this is an internal matter affecting relations between two parts of a sovereign country'; 'We have no intention of getting involved'; 'Everyone abhors violence. The President of Pakistan...was faced with a situation in which his country might have been divided in half. We must allow the Pakistan authorities to deal with the matter without our intervention'.<sup>216</sup>

The British retained this position throughout the year. Alternatively, they suggested, while violence in their former colony could 'not...be ended by external intervention...it may be helped by private advice'.<sup>217</sup> British officials so offered Pakistan frequent 'private advice' in 1971 to influence various aspects of the crisis, particularly those that presented a clear threat to regional stability and the welfare of civilians.

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<sup>215</sup> FCO 37/879. Quoted in Telegram 264, FCO—Islamabad, 27 March 1971.

<sup>216</sup> FCO 37/887. British Foreign Secretary, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, cols. 1147-1149, 29 March 1971.

<sup>217</sup> FCO 37/887. British Foreign Secretary, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, col. 40, 5 April 1971.

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Two weeks into the crisis, Edward Heath wrote to President Khan calling for an ‘end to bloodshed and the use of force as soon as possible, and a resumption of discussions’.<sup>218</sup> His otherwise frank appeal was couched in civilities: Khan must be ‘deeply distressed at the way things have turned out’; Heath sympathised with the ‘terrible dilemma in which...[he was] placed’.<sup>219</sup> Although the government must find a political solution, Heath remained ‘a friend, and a friend of Pakistan’ and ‘fully recognise[d] that these are the internal affairs of Pakistan’.<sup>220</sup>

In another letter, Heath warned the President that the efficacy of relief aid to Pakistan depended on an end to the violence: ‘While the situation in East Pakistan is an internal matter for the government of Pakistan, there is inevitably widespread international concern where so many human lives are at stake....it would be particularly bad if, in the months ahead, there was suffering and loss of life due to failure to distribute food and other supplies throughout East Pakistan. This would immensely increase the difficulty of providing essential assistance to Pakistan’.<sup>221</sup>

Weeks later, seeing that the crisis had not subsided, the Prime Minister was even more direct: ‘You [President Khan] will, I know, understand the shock...at the harrowing reports of the millions of refugees streaming into India and the heartrending tales of hunger, disease and death. While we have held strictly to the view that the constitutional position is a matter for Pakistan, there are a growing number of others who want to raise it in the Security Council’.<sup>222</sup> The Pakistan government, he

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<sup>218</sup> PREM 15/568. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 445, FCO—Islamabad, 7 April 1971. (Appendix Documents 15a and 15b)

<sup>219</sup> PREM 15/568. Text of Edward Heath’s 7 April 1971 message to Yahya Khan.

<sup>220</sup> PREM 15/568. Text of Edward Heath’s 7 April 1971 message to Yahya Khan.

<sup>221</sup> PREM 15/568. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 700, FCO—Islamabad, 28 April 1971.

<sup>222</sup> FCO 37/887. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 367, FCO—Islamabad, 11 June 1971.

continued, should guarantee civil rights in East Pakistan, punish regional authorities guilty of ‘illegal acts’ and entreat the refugees to return.<sup>223</sup>

Britain’s outgoing High Commissioner in Islamabad, Cyril Pickard, also pressured behind the scenes for a political solution. Pickard, stationed in Pakistan since 1966, was on familiar terms with many senior Pakistani officials, a fact reflected in the blunt manner in which he addressed them about the military campaign. ‘Pakistan’s public relations abroad had been appalling,’ he told the Pakistani Foreign Secretary weeks after the crackdown—‘It was simply no use repeating that everything was normal’.<sup>224</sup> The President’s intention to ‘evoke cooperation from the Bengalis...did not show in East Pakistan itself. The behaviour of the troops even today, the burning of villages, the looting which was going on, went a fair way towards frustrating the President’s intentions....[M]ilitary action was in danger of becoming self-defeating’.<sup>225</sup> Crucially, he continued, foreign aid depended on the West having a favourable opinion of Pakistan. ‘This made it particularly important for Pakistan’s public relations to be improved. Of course all this was Pakistan’s own business but equally it was the business of Britain to decide how to respond to requests for aid and assistance’.<sup>226</sup>

Later, after visiting the East himself, Pickard spoke to Pakistan’s Foreign Secretary again. ‘He [the Pakistani Foreign Secretary] questioned me anxiously about all I had seen. He was particularly horrified that massive reprisals had been justified to me by both general Tikka and the Chief Secretary. He was gravely concerned about the exodus of Hindus and the reasons for it’.<sup>227</sup> Pickard also approached other officials who held key positions within the regime, including the ex-Governor of East Pakistan, the Cabinet Secretary and the Army’s Chief of Staff. He told the latter:

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<sup>223</sup> FCO 37/887. Text of Edward Heath’s 11 June 1971 message to Yahya Khan.

<sup>224</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 696 ‘East Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 30 April 1971.

<sup>225</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 696, Islamabad—FCO, 30 April 1971.

<sup>226</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 696, Islamabad—FCO, 30 April 1971.

<sup>227</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905 ‘My Tel No 421 from Dacca to FCO: East Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

In view of our friendship, I was sure he would want me to speak frankly....What I said confirmed all his own worst impressions. He was horrified at the reprisals policy and thought it impossible to justify on any grounds at all....I told him firmly what was wanted was a guarantee that everyone was accountable to the law and that no soldier could kill except in action without being held responsible. Equally, no-one would be shot by the military authorities except as a result of some sort of trial or court martial.<sup>228</sup>

Pickard's appeals, as far as the records go, were the most explicit condemnations of the terror campaign ever expressed by a British official in 1971.

The strong style of diplomacy evident in the High Commissioner's efforts to stop the progress of state terror in East Pakistan was not dissimilar to that which his successor and the Foreign Office were to adopt weeks later when, in August 1971, it emerged that Pakistan intended to try the Awami leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for treason in a secret military tribunal. (Rahman had been arrested by the Pakistani army in the early hours of 26 March 1971 and placed in custody in West Pakistan.) International outcry was immediate—several NGOs and influential world figures submitted protests to the United Nations or directly to Pakistan's leadership.<sup>229</sup> 'This so-called trial,' India's Prime Minister told Edward Heath, 'will only be used as a cover to execute Sheikh Mujibur Rahman....We appeal to you to exercise your influence with President Yahya Khan to take a realistic view in the larger interest of the peace and stability of the region'.<sup>230</sup> The British government, Heath responded, was deeply concerned and 'considering whether there is more that we can do at this stage in the hope of dissuading him from taking any irrevocable step'.<sup>231</sup>

Meanwhile, Laurence Pumphrey, the incoming High Commissioner to Islamabad, identified the countries, organisations and British individuals most capable of influencing Pakistan:

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<sup>228</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905, Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

<sup>229</sup> See, for example, the 10 August 1971 telegram to Yahya Khan from the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Geneva; the 10 August 1971 message from Indian Foreign Minister Swaran Singh to UN Secretary General U Thant; and the 16 August 1971 Statement by John Salzberg, representative for the ICJ to the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, UN headquarters New York, reproduced in *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1, 663, 712, and 668.

<sup>230</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter from Indira Gandhi to Edward Heath, 11 August 71.

<sup>231</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's message to Indira Gandhi in Telegram 1214, FCO—New Delhi, 14 August 71.

If international pressure is to have the desired effect of saving Sheikh Mujib's life it will have to be skilfully exerted, and by the right people....The effect of private representations to President Yahya by known friends of Pakistan in Britain...should not be under-estimated, though care must be taken to avoid any hint of participation in an organised campaign, as well as any risk of eliciting the response that...[Britain]...is interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs....Whatever pressure is exerted should therefore be gradual and cumulative: we should not fire off all our ammunition at once.<sup>232</sup>

The Foreign Secretary agreed: 'Any further intervention on our part must...be undertaken swiftly' and 'the best prospect for further British intercession before the trial ends now lies in private approaches'.<sup>233</sup> He thus instructed the High Commissioner to personally approach the Pakistani President on Mujib's behalf, at the same time as he himself entreated key personalities, including Islamic leaders, to 'perform...an invaluable service both to Pakistan and world peace' by dissuading Khan from proceeding with the trial.<sup>234</sup> The Foreign Office noted that its efforts matched those of other countries, including the major powers, and thus contributed to a chorus of discreet diplomacy.

International pressure appears to have been successful; Pakistani authorities did not proceed with the trial and released Mujib in January of the following year (although circumstances surrounding the affair still remain unclear, and trial proceedings, if they exist, have never been made public). Diplomatic representations made by Edward Heath and other British officials urging Pakistan's leadership to reach a political solution in the East were less effective, as terror tactics and warfare between Bengali resisters and Pakistani forces continued throughout the year. The British concern for regional stability and the welfare of civilians evident in these various initiatives, is nevertheless notable.

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<sup>232</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1812, Islamabad—FCO, 12 August 1971.

<sup>233</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1476, FCO—Islamabad, 12 August 1971.

<sup>234</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 504, Douglas-Home FCO—Kuala Lumpur, Islamabad, UKMIS NY, Tehran, New Delhi, Washington, UKMIS Geneva, Ottawa and Canberra, 19 August 1971.

*International warfare*

Towards the end of 1971, Heath began urgently contacting state leaders to defuse the escalating military tension between India and Pakistan. In October, he met with Indira Gandhi in London who told him that India could no longer bear the strain of millions of refugees; she was under considerable pressure to take military action, but would not take the first step. 'If my impression is correct that Mrs. Gandhi really feels that she has no room for manoeuvre', Heath relayed to American President Nixon, '...it seems to me vitally important that this should be understood by President Yahya. I am myself in correspondence with him....What I shall principally urge on him is how essential it is, if we are to avert disaster, that channels of communication should be opened between the Pakistan government and the Bangla Desh leaders'.<sup>235</sup>

John Noble Graham, former Principle Private Secretary to Alec Douglas-Home, recalls attending a meeting between the Foreign Secretary and Gandhi during the latter's visit: 'The British government's main concern at that time was that the war [in East Pakistan] should not spread and that India should not intervene. I remember Mrs Gandhi's comment, almost a throwaway remark, that India would make no move until the snows came. I am not sure that the significance of this struck us immediately, but what I think she was saying was that they would not intervene until the passes were blocked by snow so that China would not be able to react militarily'.<sup>236</sup>

The Prime Minister, apprised of India's militaristic intentions and apprehensive about its consequences, continued to urge Khan in a 'spirit of friendship' to initiate dialogue with East Pakistani leaders, reminding him as he did so, of 'the very deep concern of the British Parliament and people at the tragic events which have taken place

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<sup>235</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's message to Richard Nixon in Telegram 2840, FCO—Washington, 5 November 71.

<sup>236</sup> John Noble Graham (Principal Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1969 - 1972), Letter to author, 5 July 2009.



in East Pakistan since March'.<sup>237</sup> Above all, he counselled the President to avoid confronting the Indians and internationalising the conflict: 'The urgent and crucial issue now is the risk of conflict with India....I am deeply anxious at the current state of tension which, I am convinced must be reduced if the danger is to be averted. This has been uppermost in our minds throughout all the talks which we have had in the past few days with the Indian Prime Minister'.<sup>238</sup> Advising Pakistan about how it should conduct itself in relation to India—its perennial foe with whom it had already been at war twice in the previous twenty-five years—appears a rather forward undertaking on the Prime Minister's behalf. What is more, by referring openly to his ongoing personal communication with Indira Gandhi, Heath risked strengthening Pakistan's suspicion that Britain's allegiance, contrary to its declarations of 'friendship' and 'sympathy', ultimately lay with India. All at Britain's South Asia Department were well aware of these potential threats to Anglo-Pakistani relations, yet they continued to craft Heath's communications in this open vein, reflecting Britain's unmistakable desire to prevent subcontinental war. 'I have written frankly,' the Prime Minister reminded Khan, '...in the interest of understanding between us. I will not conceal from you that...I remain deeply apprehensive. It is a situation in which I find it hard to offer advice with confidence, but I am sure that you appreciate the vital importance...of not taking any action which might be misconstrued in Delhi'.<sup>239</sup>

When India and Pakistan did eventually go to war, Britain tilted towards the former and refrained from backing the Pakistani-supported motion for a cease-fire at the Security Council. The seemingly intimate dealings with India described above, would

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<sup>237</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 1869, FCO—Islamabad, 7 November 1971.

<sup>238</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's 7 November 1971 message to Yahya Khan.

<sup>239</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's 7 November 1971 message to Yahya Khan. Other examples of HMG's private communications with Pakistan (all similar to those described) include: PREM 15/568. Telegram 534 'The Prime Minister's Message', Islamabad—FCO, 9 April 1971; PREM 15/568. 'Brief for the Prime Minister's Meeting with Mr Mian Arsha Husain [Yahya Khan's special envoy]', 26 April 1971; FCO 37/887. Letter from Anthony Royle (FCO Under Secretary of State) to Yahya Khan, 16 June 1971; PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath's message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 1360, FCO—Islamabad, 29 July 1971.

indicate that Britain had, in fact, tacitly chosen sides before the advent of international warfare, lending support to Pakistan's reservations in that regard.

### ***Post-conflict 'holocaust'***

British officials made concerted diplomatic efforts in relation to the crisis on one final occasion. After the outbreak of the Indo-Pakistani war in December 1971, when India's victory over Pakistan seemed certain, London became concerned that Pakistani POWs, West Pakistani civilians and the Bihari population would be targeted for revenge in an independent Bangladesh. Officials on the ground agreed: 'a bloodbath in East Pakistan could begin by killings of anyone (Bengali or non-Bengali) who had collaborated in any way with the Pakistani Military Administration. This could be extended pretty widely to include virtually anyone who had carried on with his normal work since 25 March'.<sup>240</sup>

By 8 December 1971, the Foreign Secretary began 'to consider, along with other friendly powers, the possibility of action, whether on a national or an international basis to minimise the risks of the "Holocaust"'.<sup>241</sup> He ordered regional officials to count the groups in question to 'have the best possible picture of the size of the problem'.<sup>242</sup> He also advised the British Mission to the UN to discuss the matter with representatives of the great powers, including the USSR and the UN secretariat. 'If a state of "Bangladesh" is to come into being,' Douglas-Home reflected, 'it should not begin its life with the appalling international reputation which would be the result of the massacres we fear'.<sup>243</sup> Of course, '[i]t is idle to think that anyone could hope to prevent all revenge killings of which there are bound to be many. But the Indians, given the

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<sup>240</sup> FCO 37/897. Secret Minute 'East Pakistan', New Delhi—FCO, 15 December 1971.

<sup>241</sup> FCO 37/897. Secret Telegram 1111 'Delhi Tel 2999: East Pakistan', FCO—UKMIS NY, 8 December 1971. (Appendix Document 20)

<sup>242</sup> FCO 37/897. Secret Telegram 1111, FCO—UKMIS NY, 8 December 1971.

<sup>243</sup> FCO 37/897. Secret Telegram 1111, FCO—UKMIS NY, 8 December 1971.

role they have played so far, must be asked to assume responsibility for ensuring that there are no wholesale massacres of civilians'.<sup>244</sup>

Edward Heath, for his part, assured the new President of Pakistan, Z. A. Bhutto, who had appealed to world leaders for assistance, that Britain was acutely concerned about possible 'revenge killings in the East'.<sup>245</sup> Meanwhile British officials in the region, as instructed by London, sought to verify whether there genuinely was such a risk. To supplement these efforts, Britain sent funds to a Red Cross delegation in East Pakistan that had arrived after the Indo-Pakistani war, hopeful that an international presence would deter further violence.<sup>246</sup>

Britain took no other action. On 21 December 1971, after visiting enclaves of non-Bengalis in self-administered refugee camps on the outskirts of Dacca, the Deputy High Commissioner reported: 'It seems clear that numbers of Biharis have been killed in Dacca....Rumoured figures wax wildly....it is impossible to be certain of numbers, but it seems reasonably certain that there has been nothing on the scale of a massacre'.<sup>247</sup> London, satisfied that the volatility of the situation was exaggerated, concluded that Pakistan was 'over-playing the risk to the Biharis',<sup>248</sup> to embarrass Indian and Bangladeshi leaders. Moreover, on 4 February 1972, HMG recognized Bangladesh and thus 'also recognized that its minority problems were...its own internal affair'.<sup>249</sup> 'Only if there is clear evidence that the Bangladesh Government are adopting a policy

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<sup>244</sup> FCO 37/897. Secret Telegram 1111, FCO—UKMIS NY, 8 December 1971.

<sup>245</sup> FCO 37/897. Text of Edward Heath's message to Z. A. Bhutto in Telegram 2402, FCO—Islamabad, 28 December 1971. (Appendix Document 21)

<sup>246</sup> FCO 37/897. Brief, SAD—FCO, 30 December 1971.

<sup>247</sup> FCO 37/897. Telegram 744, Rae Britten (new Deputy High Commissioner to East Pakistan) Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 23 December 1971. Britten also reported that although Biharis were living in dire conditions, 'no mass killings' had occurred (FCO 37/1016. Telegram 18 'Conditions in Khulna', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 12 January 1972; FCO 37/897. Telegram 723, Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 17 December 1971).

<sup>248</sup> UKNA: PREM 15/2010 entitled 'Bangladesh—Internal Situation Part 2; position of the Biharis; entry into Commonwealth'. Letter 'The Situation in the Sub-Continent', FCO—10 Downing Street, 9 February 1972.

<sup>249</sup> PREM 15/2010. 9 February 1972 Letter 'The Situation in the Sub-Continent', FCO—10 Downing Street.

of repression should we consider getting involved in public or private remonstrances'.<sup>250</sup>

Stronger intervention, the government concluded, was ultimately not in Britain's interests: 'It is sad that we cannot do more for the Biharis,' a Downing Street official told the PM, 'but...more direct espousal of their cause would erode the position HMG have built up equidistant between India and Pakistan. No other large power has succeeded in doing this and the Bihari issue could damage us even at this stage'.<sup>251</sup> Britain thus upheld a policy of non-interference, predicated on arguments similar to those it had employed to avoid intervening in the East Pakistan crisis itself: namely, that state sovereignty must be respected, Britain had limited influence and capabilities, and interference would jeopardise wider regional interests. Even so, HMG's obvious concern and readiness to engage in 'public or private remonstrances'<sup>252</sup> had it become evident that the Bangladesh government was enacting repressive policies, reflects Britain's willingness to employ robust diplomacy if necessary, for a chiefly humanitarian cause.

### ***Contextual factors underlying British diplomatic efforts***

Edward Heath and other British officials, throughout 1971, counselled Pakistani authorities to end the military campaign in East Pakistan, reach a political solution with Bengali leaders, and avoid war with India. The government also expressed its concern that authorities on the subcontinent should protect vulnerable groups or persons from harm, and made efforts to establish whether that was in fact happening. Officials carried out these initiatives alone, or multilaterally, in letters and personal meetings on a

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<sup>250</sup> PREM 15/2010. 9 February 1972 Letter 'The Situation in the Sub-Continent', FCO—10 Downing Street.

<sup>251</sup> PREM 15/2010. Note and Draft Reply to Bhutto, 10 Downing Street (internal circulation), 11 February 1972. Edward Heath's handwritten annotation on the note reads: 'Agreed'.

<sup>252</sup> PREM 15/2010. 9 February 1972 Letter 'The Situation in the Sub-Continent', FCO—10 Downing Street.

formal and informal basis. In many cases, Foreign Office officials carefully devised the content of this communication in advance, producing several drafts in consultation with one another. The language and tone employed in such initiatives—particularly by the Prime Minister, whose generally candid messages to Pakistan’s President tended to be couched in conciliatory language—thus appear to have been formulated according to a number of considerations, described below.

*Sensitive post-colonial relations*

Of these considerations, the fragile nature of Anglo-Pakistani relations in the post-war era seems to have ranked first. Foreign Office officials in the region often expressed the opinion that, unless Britain exerted private pressure with considerable discretion, the government risked alienating Pakistan’s leadership and losing influence in the region altogether. Britain’s High Commissioner, for example, a few weeks after the crackdown, suggested that the Prime Minister could ‘try to bring home to the President that his course so far has been suicidal, [and] to set out for him the minimum concessions to world public opinion’, such as ‘the abandonment of terror tactics’ or ‘an end to anti-Hindu incitement’.<sup>253</sup> However, he concluded, ‘[u]nilaterally to broach any of these concessions to the President would incur his abiding hostility....Yahya will not respond to moral lectures or arguments that his policy has been mistaken’.<sup>254</sup>

Indeed, Edward Heath’s single reference to ‘bloodshed’, in an otherwise sympathetic letter, apparently did offend the Pakistani President.<sup>255</sup> Britain’s High Commissioner, after delivering the message, thus dutifully explained that his Prime Minister had simply meant ‘that there had been bloodshed on *both* sides....Military

<sup>253</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/886. Telegram 765, Islamabad—FCO. 6 May 1971. (Appendix Document 17)

<sup>254</sup> FCO 37/886. Telegram 765, Islamabad—FCO. 6 May 1971.

<sup>255</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 445, FCO—Islamabad, 7 April 1971.

action involved bloodshed which made the attainment of his [Khan's] ultimate objective more difficult'.<sup>256</sup>

British officials were, moreover, keenly aware of their contentious role as ex-colonialists in Pakistan. As Richard Wood, the Overseas Development Agency Minister, put it:

The problem facing the United Kingdom Government is—how can we do anything useful without simply being subjected to the charge by Pakistan that we are interfering in its internal affairs and possibly finding that anything we do is counter-productive?...For Britain alone to try to act in a matter like this is to arouse all the suspicions that we are trying to be the imperial power again.<sup>257</sup>

Anglo-Pakistan relations at the time of the crisis were, without question, volatile. Two treatments of the British response published in Pakistan and referred to earlier (Aziz (1974) and Qureshi (1976)), point indignantly to the existence of institutionalised British 'hostility' towards Pakistan.<sup>258</sup> This argument is described in distinctly polemic overtones, reflecting the sensitivity, even emotion, with which some viewed the former colonial power. Shehar Khan, in his more even-toned analysis of 'Relations between Pakistan and Britain, 1947-1962', attributes this sensitivity to circumstances surrounding the division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, a division he explains, which was widely perceived in Pakistan as favouring India.<sup>259</sup> Thus Qureshi's assertion that 'the manner in which Pakistan became independent has coloured all the political life of the State, [and] has governed Pakistan's emotional and practical attitude towards Britain', however heatedly recounted, appears to hold some truth.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 533 'The Prime Minister's Message', Islamabad—FCO, 9 April 1971; emphasis added.

<sup>257</sup> FCO 37/887. Richard Wood, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 768, 14 May 1971.

<sup>258</sup> Khursheed Kamal Aziz, *Britain and Pakistan: A Study of British Attitude Towards the East Pakistan Crisis of 1971* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1974; reprint 2008) and M. Aslam Qureshi, *Anglo-Pakistan Relations, 1947-1976* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1976).

<sup>259</sup> Shehar Bano Khan, 'Relations between Pakistan and Britain, 1947-1962: with special reference to the reports of the British High Commissioners in Pakistan' (M.A. thesis, University of London: Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1993).

<sup>260</sup> Qureshi *Anglo-Pakistan Relations*, ii.

Laurence Pumphrey was confronted by the problems attending this complex relationship upon his arrival in East Pakistan in mid-1971; he too located their source in historical associations and confrontations:

Of foreigners, we have the deepest knowledge of this part of the world and take the deepest interest in it. Our views, as expressed in Parliament, the BBC or the press, are believed here to carry weight far beyond our own borders. We can be attacked as former imperialists who frustrated the normal development of the Sub-Continent, always it has seemed favouring the Hindu against the Muslim. That we are fundamentally hostile to Islam is apparent—to the eyes of the Islamic bigot—from all that lies between our participation in the Crusades and the Suez operation of 1956....it is not surprising that after the Indians we are the first object of official displeasure.<sup>261</sup>

So it was that, despite efforts by the Heath administration during the crisis to retain the confidence of Pakistani officials with declarations of ‘warmth’ and ‘friendship’, Britain was eventually accused of engaging in ‘anti-Pakistan activities’<sup>262</sup> and, indeed, of interfering in Pakistan’s internal affairs—the very charge they strove to avoid. ‘[W]hen the time comes to pick up the bits of our shattered relationship,’ Pumphrey surmised well before the end of the crisis, ‘we shall find that some of them have been lost’.<sup>263</sup> British officials, it would appear, had some justification to treat relations with Pakistan during the period with caution.

#### *Avoidance of harmful repercussions*

The Foreign Office, aware that diplomatic representations on the subject of the crisis could threaten fragile relations, believed that stronger forms of pressure might have even greater ramifications. Senior officials, for example, agreed that the Aid to Pakistan Consortium had substantial influence in the region, but that interrupting development aid in progress would be unwise. A ‘complete cut-off’ may destroy the Pakistani economy and have ‘incalculable results’ in India, compounding the humanitarian crises both in Bengal and in East Pakistan.<sup>264</sup> President Khan, on the

<sup>261</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter ‘First Impressions of Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 21 September 1971.

<sup>262</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1372, Islamabad—FCO, 3 July 1971. (Appendix Document 16a)

<sup>263</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter ‘First Impressions of Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 21 September 1971.

<sup>264</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971.

other hand, was likely to be more open to suggestions from ‘those he regards as friends’, namely the British government or the UN Secretary General.<sup>265</sup> Seeing that the British government genuinely hope to assist, ‘whether or not the Secretary-General is prepared to make a further effort, HMG should’.<sup>266</sup>

‘Agreed,’ responded the Prime Minister in a handwritten annotation to these suggestions,<sup>267</sup> and sent a letter (drafted by the South Asia Department) to Khan stating that, ‘[u]nless confidence can be restored and the migration, for whatever reason, of millions of Pakistanis can be stopped, the world community will be frustrated in its efforts to help to solve this tragic human problem....Evidence towards a political solution will, more than anything else, ensure continued support for Pakistan’.<sup>268</sup>

The Prime Minister’s message referred only obliquely to Pakistan’s persecution of East Pakistani civilians. HMG tended to remain deliberately vague on this aspect of the violence (comments upon which readily caused offence)—thus, the refugees were fleeing ‘for whatever reason’. However Heath’s message did imply that if political violence in the region did not end, consequences for Pakistan would be grave, including possible Security Council intervention. Clearly, British officials were convinced that a combination of frank *and* cautious diplomatic representations from Pakistan’s ‘friends’ could have some effect. Conversely, stronger measures like public or private admonitions or withdrawing aid entirely, might have jeopardized the safety of British nationals in the region, bred support for extremist groups, and damaged the West’s overall ability to pressure for an end to the hostilities—adverse consequences in no states’ interests.<sup>269</sup> They accordingly advised the Prime Minister to exert pressure on

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<sup>265</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971.

<sup>266</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971.

<sup>267</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971. (Appendix Document 18)

<sup>268</sup> FCO 37/887. Telegram 367 containing text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan, FCO—Islamabad, 11 June 1971.

<sup>269</sup> See, for example, FCO 37/879. Telegram 163, Dacca—FCO, 29 March 1971; FCO 37/887. ‘Record of a Conversation between the Permanent Under-Secretary of State and Mr. Arnold Smith, Secretary General, Commonwealth Secretariat’, 14 June 1971; FCO 37/889. Brief No. 4: ‘Speaking Note’ (notes for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting, London, 1 July 1971), no date.



Khan throughout the crisis through carefully-worded confidential initiatives that retained, above all, a balanced tone: ‘We have sought...to continue the frank exchange between the Prime Minister and the President without unnecessarily antagonizing Yahya Khan’.<sup>270</sup>

### *Confidence in state authorities*

British officials had a further motive for exercising discreet diplomacy: they believed that Pakistani authorities were genuinely seeking to resume political negotiations with representatives of East Pakistan. Hence, Richard Wood’s conviction that although, ‘we all feel at the suffering which, not tens or hundreds of thousands, but literally millions of human beings have undergone as a result of these recent events,...I remain convinced today—that the President was wholly sincere in his desire to establish a civilian democratic government’.<sup>271</sup> The Foreign Secretary agreed—Pakistani authorities understood the importance of a political compromise. Indeed, ‘I think that the President of Pakistan is convinced of this. He tells us that he is busily engaged in trying to create the political structure on the ground in East Pakistan which will give the necessary confidence to the refugees to return’.<sup>272</sup> The Cabinet Defence Committee was also certain that Britain should continue urging a political compromise, as Khan ‘is probably sincere in his wish for an agreed solution to the problem’.<sup>273</sup>

As described earlier, Britain’s faith in Pakistani authorities was founded, in part, on various measures the central government took mid-year to improve conditions in the East, such as allowing in UNHCR representatives, lifting the media ban, and declaring a partial amnesty for junior Awami League politicians. Khan reinforced these acts by

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<sup>270</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 21 July 1971.

<sup>271</sup> FCO 37/887. Richard Wood, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 761-762, 14 May 1971.

<sup>272</sup> FCO 37/889. Alec Douglas-Home, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 871, 8 June 1971.

<sup>273</sup> UKNA: CAB 148/116. ‘Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’, 27 July 1971.

declaring his intention to hold fresh elections.<sup>274</sup> Although these steps ‘had virtually no effect’,<sup>275</sup> the Foreign Office remained certain that they reflected the President’s desire to restore democracy to Pakistan, which was after all, consistent with the attempt to hold elections to begin with. Britain’s private initiatives were thus crafted with requisite discretion: ‘We want to retain...what influence we still may have with Yahya Khan....He is still, we believe, genuinely seeking a way out of the present impasse....to insist that the President has not done enough would merely turn him against us’.<sup>276</sup>

*Political realism and humanitarianism*

Foreign Office officials also believed that direct disapproval would simply not work—‘Yahya,’ the High Commissioner in Islamabad insisted, ‘will not respond to moral lectures or arguments that his policy has been mistaken’.<sup>277</sup> Interestingly, the High Commissioner seems to have disregarded his own advice: Cyril Pickard, after visiting East Pakistan, denounced the Army’s conduct directly to several senior military commanders; he felt those he spoke to were ‘greatly moved’ by all he said and was convinced they would ‘speak to the President and see what steps can be taken to remove the state of fear in East Pakistan and restore some confidence’.<sup>278</sup>

Archer Blood, the American Consul General in Dacca in 1971, recalls in his memoirs having engaged in lengthy conversations with Pickard. ‘Pickard told me...he had confronted Tikka directly with possibility that Pak Army [sic] is bent on extermination or removal of Hindus from East Pakistan. Tikka had denied any such intention...Sir Cyril...told me he was going to report plight of refugees to General Hameed (Tikka’s superior) in effort to ‘make their welfare a touchstone of Army

<sup>274</sup> See FCO 37/889. ‘Transcript of Yahya Khan’s Address in English to the Nation’, Press Information Department of the Government of Pakistan—FCO, 28 June 1971.

<sup>275</sup> FCO 37/889. ‘Pakistan: Note for the Secretary of State’s Use in Cabinet on 8 July’ (handwritten annotation), SAD—FCO, 7 July 1971.

<sup>276</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 21 July 1971.

<sup>277</sup> FCO 37/886. Telegram 765, Islamabad—FCO, 6 May 1971.

<sup>278</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905 ‘My TEL NO 421 from Dacca to FCO: East Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

intentions’.”<sup>279</sup> Moreover, from talks he recently had with Yahya and other senior authorities, “Sir Cyril was convinced that they sincerely wanted to restore civilian rule but....progress toward a political solution was hardly possible when the Army was busily burning villages in reprisal and killing Hindus throughout the province. He said...he intended to urge on him [General Hameed] the absolute necessity of an end to Army violence as a pre-condition to political solution”.<sup>280</sup>

Pickard’s exchanges with Pakistani authorities—according to the records—are a unique example of a British official bluntly pressuring Pakistan’s leadership to put an end to military operations in the East. It is interesting to note that the High Commissioner made these efforts after touring East Pakistan; Britain’s most senior representatives, stationed in the West, rarely travelled to gather first-hand impressions of the Eastern wing. In this case, Pickard’s visit moved him from simply reporting the violence in East Pakistan to directly disapproving of it. Of course, Pickard took these actions at the end of his tour in Islamabad, a tour that had lasted the standard duration of such postings. He was, as he himself reported, simply taking leave of local authorities; many calls were ‘intended...to be purely...formal’,<sup>281</sup> although it is clear that they went beyond that. Ian McCluney, a former Foreign Office official and later High Commissioner to Sierra Leone, was not surprised that Pickard spoke so openly to authorities on this occasion.<sup>282</sup> Diplomats, he explained, have difficulty accessing local authorities—they are constantly looking for the *excuse* to talk to them. Pickard’s farewell calls provided a perfect opportunity to pressure for a change in Pakistani policy under the guise of protocol. Indeed, London may have been aware that this could transpire; Foreign Office diplomats, McCluney confirms, are permitted to ‘vent’ their

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<sup>279</sup> Telegram, American Consulate General Dacca—American Embassy Islamabad, 19 May 1971. Quoted in Archer K. Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat* (Dhaka: University Press, 2002), 220.

<sup>280</sup> Telegram, American Consulate General Dacca—American Embassy Islamabad, n. d. May 1971. Quoted in Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 299.

<sup>281</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905, Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971.

<sup>282</sup> Ian McCluney (Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1969 - 1971), Personal Interview by author, 26 September 2009, London UK.

grievances or ‘air their views’, within reason, about a country to which they have been posted as a matter of standard leave-taking procedure (particularly if their experience has been a volatile one, as in conflict-ridden areas).<sup>283</sup> Whatever the case, the fact that the British High Commissioner in Islamabad condemned the Army’s actions to senior figures in the Pakistani administration is a noteworthy addition to Britain’s diplomatic efforts to defuse the crisis, and an example of the concerned and forthright diplomacy that officials were capable of pursuing.

The Foreign Office exerted a similar style of diplomacy in August 1971, when upon hearing that Mujibur Rahman risked execution, they rapidly assessed how Britain could dissuade Pakistani leaders from taking the ‘irrevocable’<sup>284</sup> step. As with violence in the East, officials decided diplomatic channels would be most effective, and proceeded to make private representations. Senior officials, including Alec Douglas-Home, agreed to act swiftly, and approached those they believed had influence in Pakistan, including President Khan. Their internal messages on the subject are imbued with urgency. Indeed, Britain’s Foreign Secretary made it clear to Pakistan’s High Commissioner in London that he personally opposed trying the Awami leader, and while he was ‘an old friend of Pakistan...there was one thing which could very much upset this, namely the execution of Mujib’.<sup>285</sup>

It is interesting to note that the flurry of diplomatic activity accompanying Mujibur Rahman’s trial in August and, later on, the fate of the Bihari population in December 1971, stands in contrast to the somewhat more reserved missives about political violence in East Pakistan. Douglas-Home, for his part, expressed no ‘personal

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<sup>283</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>284</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Indira Gandhi in Telegram 1214, FCO—New Delhi, 14 August 71.

<sup>285</sup> PREM 15/569. Secret Telegram 1421 ‘Trial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’, FCO—Islamabad, 6 August 1971. (Appendix Document 19)

opinion'<sup>286</sup> on the matter, neither to Pakistani authorities nor in internal communications on the subject.

Given that officials only occasionally exercised such concerted diplomacy, however, one can merely speculate upon their motives. It was perhaps easier to process single clearly defined issues, like the fate of one man, or the risks to a vulnerable minority in peace time; systematic and spontaneous state slaughter—amidst civil war and interethnic violence—may simply have been too vast to assimilate. The cases of Mujibur and the Biharis presented clear-cut and circumscribed moral, political and legal challenges, which offered the prospect of resolution. The string of massacres in East Pakistan committed by all sides, as a former Foreign Office official said, were a 'blur'<sup>287</sup>—and, therefore, more difficult to digest, and infinitely more difficult to respond to in any manner that might have been considered effective.

In the case of Mujibur Rahman's trial, moreover, while humanitarianism may have been a factor, officials believed a verdict ending in execution would severely disrupt regional stability and spark widespread public outcry. As Peter Smith recalls, Britain's High Commissioner in Islamabad was asked to approach Pakistan's President 'to ensure he [Mujib] was being treated decently....just to express worry, really. And I suppose it was so that Douglas-Home could say in Parliament, "We have instructed our High Commissioner to express our concern".<sup>288</sup> '[Y]ou have to be able to say you're doing these things to Parliament'.<sup>289</sup>

Diplomatic intervention on behalf of Sheikh Mujib, in other words, appears to have been essentially strategic. 'You can't get personal, you just can't—it would be disastrous,' declares Smith. 'The High Commissioner was sent to Yahya to "make representations" is the diplomatic phrase, and he did, and that was that. But it wasn't

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<sup>286</sup> PREM 15/569. Secret Telegram 1421 'Trial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman', FCO—Islamabad, 6 August 1971.

<sup>287</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

<sup>288</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>289</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

“you must let him go”, it was just “for goodness sake, can you assure us that he’s decently treated”?”<sup>290</sup> Britain, moreover, was not acting alone—governments worldwide, including the United States, were pressuring Pakistan to desist, and multilateral action was considered infinitely less controversial.

Finally, officials appeared to feel that discreet diplomatic measures could earn ‘political points’ for their country and boost the government’s image at home. This is supported by Britain’s subsequent encounter with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who, after his release from Pakistan in January 1972, stopped unexpectedly in London en route to Dacca. Senior British officials welcomed him warmly, confidentially sponsored him for the evening and sent him to Dacca on an RAF aircraft. They did this, they wrote, ‘in view of the political advantages to be gained by the provision of the Comet, which was strongly supported by the FCO....It was a very notable success on our part that it was a British aircraft which brought Sheikh Mujib home’.<sup>291</sup> Political strategising and humanitarianism, as it were, often intersected in Britain’s diplomatic efforts in 1971.

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<sup>290</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>291</sup> UKNA: FCO 57/345 entitled ‘Visit of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to London on release from Pakistan on 8 January 1972’. Telegram 73, Dacca—FCO, 11 January 1972.

*Summary: diplomatic efforts*

British officials regularly employed discreet diplomacy during the crisis in order to encourage Pakistani authorities to resume political negotiations, avoid international war and ensure the welfare of civilians, especially vulnerable minorities. There is no evidence that the government sought to approach Pakistan's leadership using non-diplomatic channels, via for example, commercial, media, military or security services. Indeed, officials appeared wary of using these, particularly the media (BBC), whose critical reporting of events it was feared might jeopardise the safety of British nationals in the region and erode Britain's claims of neutrality. Traditional diplomacy thus appeared to be HMG's preferred strategy, as far as the records go.

The tone that pervaded the greater part of this communication shifted between frankness, reserve and empathy, all the while seeking to exert discreet pressure. On the whole, British officials genuinely wished to ease suffering on the subcontinent; they believed that the Pakistani government was trying to achieve peace, and that strong pressure would jeopardise British interests in the region (including nationals), as well as Britain's ability to influence Pakistan—influence which was tenuous in light of the sensitive nature of post-colonial relations.

Robust diplomatic activity around an apparently humanitarian issue was rare, but it also took place. As Cyril Pickard was to describe years later at a seminar on contemporary British diplomacy, it is precisely this type of variegated communication—which aims to influence by alternating conciliation with pressure that is a key function of the diplomat.<sup>292</sup> It is evident from government records that the British sought to do just that in the case of the East Pakistan crisis, motivated by considerations ranging from political realism to basic human concern.

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<sup>292</sup> Cyril Pickard, 'Foreign Policy and the Diplomat', paper presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Postgraduate Seminar, *Commonwealth Relations: The Commonwealth and Contemporary British Diplomacy*, University of London, 1 February 1977.

## ii. DOMESTIC RESPONSES & THE QUESTION OF GENOCIDE

*'Britain has enduring influence on the subcontinent....Will the Foreign Office contrive privately even one formal expression of horror and regret? No single act at this stage will end the tempest of Bangla Desh....But this very fact makes all protests, however meek, however genteel, a contribution to human dignity, and it makes silence shameful'.*

—'A Time to Speak Out', *The Guardian*, 3 April 1971<sup>293</sup>

Throughout the crisis, Foreign Office officials monitored British media coverage of events and retained clippings of newspaper articles, the majority of which were entered in a file entitled 'News Items on East and West Pakistan'.<sup>294</sup> Their apparent aim in collecting this material was not to gain insights into the crisis itself,<sup>295</sup> but to 'gauge the temperature'<sup>296</sup> of the print media, which constituted the British public's main source of information. The government's overall assessment, evinced in various documents, was that this 'temperature' was moderately to overtly pro-East Pakistani—as articles tended to be critical of alleged atrocities committed by all parties, yet those describing state terror against Bengalis were notably lengthy and censorious. This appeared to be the case, moreover, across the political spectrum, with both left leaning and right leaning newspapers pressuring the British government to show a level of solidarity with East Pakistan, short of direct involvement.<sup>297</sup>

Harun Or-Rashid's essay, 'British Perspectives, Pressures and Publicity Regarding Bangladesh, 1971', includes a statistical survey of media reports which supports the government's assessment. Rashid writes: 'The sheer amount of coverage in the British media during the period of 10 months (from March to December) can be indicated by their frequent editorials: *The Times* 29, *The Daily Telegraph* 39, *The*

<sup>293</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/883. Clipping of 'A Time to Speak Out', *The Guardian* (London), 3 April 1971.

<sup>294</sup> File reference FCO 26/845.

<sup>295</sup> Given that most foreign journalists were expelled at the end of March 1971 and, with few exceptions, relied on a variety of indirect accounts (in translation) for their reports, this coverage is a problematic source of information on the crisis itself. Bose reflects on what she calls 'media misreporting' in 'Fragments of Memories: Researching Violence in the 1971 Bangladesh War', *History Workshop Journal Advance Access* (23 February 2012), 5-6, <http://hwj.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/02/23/hwj.dbr057.abstract> (last accessed 2 March 2012).

<sup>296</sup> FCO 26/845. Note, SAD—FCO (internal circulation), 2 April 1971.

<sup>297</sup> FCO 26/845, for example, contains articles from *The Times* and its sister newspaper *The Sunday Times* (centre-right), *The Guardian* and its sister newspaper *The Observer* (centre-left), the *New Statesmen* (the leftist weekly magazine), as well as the *Daily Express* and *The Daily Telegraph* (centre-right).



*Guardian* 37, the *Financial Times* 13 and *The Observer* 15....the British media did not totally favour the idea of complete separation. Their general preference was a speedy political solution within the framework of united Pakistan'.<sup>298</sup> *Bangladesh Documents* (Dhaka University Press 1999), a 700-page volume containing scores of British press articles on the crisis, illustrates a similar picture.<sup>299</sup>

Both of these sources, it should be noted, are problematic. Or-Rashid, for example, does not state where he obtained the large number of media articles he purports to have surveyed, nor does he provide any analysis of the latter. Meanwhile, *Bangladesh Documents* was originally published in the autumn of 1971 in collaboration with the Indian Ministry for External Affairs, as the threat of Indo-Pakistani war loomed closer. The introduction to the original version, and that of the revised and expanded edition cited here, is unsurprisingly in favour of Bangladeshi independence both in tone and in the selection of clippings.<sup>300</sup> Yet upon cross-referencing the articles cited by both sources with the British government's own media files, it was found that all three contain a similar selection—thus reinforcing HMG's assessment that British media coverage was indeed largely sympathetic to the East Pakistani cause. (British officials, moreover, claimed to be gathering 'as a wide as possible a selection'<sup>301</sup> of reports on the crisis, and none of those they kept on file expressed support for the West Pakistani regime.)

The centre-left *Guardian* appeared to be at the forefront of this reporting; it declared at the outset of the crisis that the Pakistani President was guilty of:

filling his air waves and press with evasive propaganda, [and] deporting every journalist he could find. But a few independent reporters escaped this net and their stories—just emerging—reek with horror: crowds indiscriminately machine gunned, student hostels razed by shells, shanty towns burned and bombed, civilians shot dead in their beds.

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<sup>298</sup> Or-Rashid 'British Perspectives', 142-143.

<sup>299</sup> *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rvsd. and enlrgd., eds. Sheelendra Singh et al. (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999; first edition published by New Delhi: Ministry for External Affairs, Government of India, 1971), 345-487.

<sup>300</sup> The same can be said of *Bangladesh Genocide and World Press*, ed. Fazlul Quader Quaderi (Dhaka: Amatul Quader, 1997).

<sup>301</sup> FCO 26/845. Note, SAD—FCO (internal circulation), 2 April 1971.

...[W]e...know first-hand and reliably that many unarmed and unready Bangalis [sic] have died....Those—like Britain—who retain some prestige of influence [sic] in the area, should spend it openly and forcefully. The fate of Dacca is a crime against humanity and human aspirations; no one should stand mealy-mouthed by.<sup>303</sup>

Those at the Foreign Office monitoring the vigorous press coverage worried about the rousing effect it would have on the public. They promptly informed the Prime Minister days into the conflict that public sympathy for Bengalis was building as ‘the press are beginning to carry eye-witness accounts of the slaughter in the East Wing and as more people leave East Pakistan these reports can be expected to increase’.<sup>304</sup> The Foreign Office also counted, circulated and filed protest letters on East Pakistan, noting with concern how widely-read newspapers say that ‘there is a widespread feeling among MPs at Westminster that Britain should “do something much more decisive”’.<sup>305</sup>

At the same time, the Prime Minister was informed that sections of London’s Bengali community had begun to demonstrate regularly in front of Pakistan’s High Commission, as well as in Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park and other public spaces throughout the capital.<sup>306</sup> Private citizens who wrote to the government directly urged it to condemn the violence, warning that ‘continued silence and inaction will ultimately prove infinitely more dangerous than definite but wise action’.<sup>307</sup> Officials in the South Asia Department rarely reflected (at least on record) on the sources of this protest, but appeared more concerned with gauging its extent and predicting its effect on public opinion. From what can be ascertained (from signatures or return addresses preserved in the files, for example), civil protest in Britain appeared to be coming primarily from the East Pakistani migrant population in London, with a minority from white middle-class citizens of British origin. The level of organisation and communication between those who protested is unclear, although government officials noted the existence of

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<sup>303</sup> Editorial ‘A Massacre in East Pakistan’, *The Guardian* (London), 31 March 1971. Reprinted in *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1, 387-388.

<sup>304</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 2 April 1971.

<sup>305</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 4 April 1971.

<sup>306</sup> PREM 15/568. ‘Pakistan Situation Report’, PEU—10 Downing Street, 2 April 1971.

<sup>307</sup> FCO 37/895. Letter to Prime Minister from Gwyn and Joyce Lewis, 15 April 1971.

‘pro-Bangla Desh organisations in this country’ of apparently mixed membership.<sup>308</sup> (Or-Rashid, for his part, contends that influential Bengali figures resident in Britain attempted with some success to organise the ‘the most amorphous and fragmented Bengali community’.<sup>309</sup>)

Parliamentarians of the opposition also submitted several motions petitioning the government to act more robustly.<sup>310</sup> ‘They are indicative,’ the FCO noted, ‘of the amount of interest being shown by MPs in Pakistan’.<sup>311</sup> Some pressured the Prime Minister in Parliament to denounce the violence publicly: ‘Is it not time HMG made an outright and forthright condemnation of the bloody outrages now being committed by the Pakistani Army on the East Pakistanis?’<sup>312</sup> ‘Are not the reports coming out of East Pakistan so outrageous that some comment is called for?’<sup>313</sup> Others pressed the government to raise the matter at the Security Council as a threat to international peace and security. ‘By many standards, this must be a situation which seriously threatens the peace of that region...Britain should [be]...taking an initiative and invoking the political good offices of the United Nations, working not simply on the relief side but...urgently and actively...for the peace and security of Asia’.<sup>314</sup>

HMG, while publicly maintaining their neutrality, considered how to respond to this pressure—which, to their dismay, intensified as the conflict wore on, as segments of the British media, political opposition, and the public began accusing Pakistan of

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<sup>308</sup> FCO 37/889. Confidential Minute, SAD—UN Economic and Social Department (E&S Dept) of the FCO, 9 July 1971; for a rare reflection on the backgrounds of protesters, see FCO 37/888. Letter ‘Letters to the Secretary of State about East Pakistan’, SAD—FCO, 25 June 1971.

<sup>309</sup> Or-Rashid ‘British Perspectives’, 145.

<sup>310</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/894. Letter enclosing ‘Outstanding [Opposition] motions on East Pakistan in House of Commons Order paper: Harold Wilson, Bruce Douglas-Mann, Peter Shore’, SAD—Islamabad, 28 October 1971; UKNA: FCO 37/885. Letter ‘Opposition Motion on Pakistan’, enclosing motions from Michael Foot and Bruce Douglas-Mann, FCO—Lord President’s Office, no date.

<sup>311</sup> FCO 37/894. Letter enclosing ‘Outstanding [Opposition] motions on East Pakistan’, SAD—Islamabad, 28 October 1971.

<sup>312</sup> PREM 15/568. Labour MP William Hamilton, ‘India and Pakistan’, questions to PM, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 944, 20 April 1971.

<sup>313</sup> PREM 15/568. Liberal MP David Steel, ‘India and Pakistan’, questions to PM, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 944, 20 April 1971.

<sup>314</sup> FCO 37/889. Labour MP George Thomson, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 1130, 9 June 1971.

grossly violating international human rights norms, and even of genocide. *The Sunday Times*, most famously, allotted a three-page spread to Anthony Mascarenhas' graphic article entitled 'Genocide' in large bold typescript. Mascarenhas, an Indian-born journalist who lived in West Pakistan, was given leave by Pakistani authorities to undertake an army-escorted tour of the Eastern wing in April 1971. Shocked by his experience, Mascarenhas fled to Britain where the widely circulated centre-right *Sunday Times* agreed to publish his account of the violence:

I saw Hindus, hunted from village to village and door to door, shot off-hand after a cursory 'short-arm inspection' showed they were uncircumcised. I have heard the screams of men bludgeoned to death in the...civil administration headquarters in Comilla. I have seen truck loads of other human targets and those who had the humanity to try to help them hauled off 'for disposal' under the cover of darkness and curfew. I have witnessed the 'kill and burn missions'...I have seen whole villages devastated by 'punitive action'. And in the officers mess at night I have listened incredulously as otherwise brave and honourable men proudly chewed over the day's kill. 'How many did you get?' The answers are seared in my memory. All this is being done, as any West Pakistani officer will tell you, for the 'preservation of the unity, the integrity and the ideology of Pakistan'.<sup>315</sup>

The article, with its unsettling descriptions of state persecution (and also, incidentally, of massacres committed by Bengalis<sup>316</sup>), appeared to firmly entrench British public opinion against Pakistan's leadership.

After its appearance, Toby Jessel, a former Conservative MP for Twickenham and member of the July 1971 India/Pakistan parliamentary delegation, recalls receiving scores of letters from his constituency requesting more be done to stop the progress of violence in East Pakistan.<sup>317</sup> The South Asia Department, for its part, recorded that it had received '76 letters from MPs..., 184 letters and telegrams from the public..., 14 petitions and 220 copies of a letter which appeared in *The Guardian*...headed "East Bengal Atrocities", as well as a plea to the Prime Minister, 'Please do not allow Britain

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<sup>315</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, 'Genocide', *The Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 1971 (source: Jessel Personal Papers). (Appendix Document 8)

<sup>316</sup> The editorial accompanying the article read: 'in the present welter of blood and persecution, the Bengalis themselves, as our story makes plain, must bear some of the responsibility for their acts of retributive violence against non-Bengalis. But when all this has been said, there is no escaping the terrible charge of deliberate, premeditated extermination levelled by the facts against the present Pakistani government' (*The Sunday Times*, 13 June 1971).

<sup>317</sup> Toby Jessel, Interview by author, 26 September 2009, London UK.

to become an accomplice in genocide'.<sup>318</sup> These letters variably demanded that Britain suspend aid to Pakistan and publicly condemn the government, recognize 'Bangladesh' or raise the matter at the Security Council. 'None of the letters,' the Department noted, 'have offered unqualified support for the British Government; they have all asked for a stronger line....demand[ing] that more should be done'.<sup>319</sup>

British representatives in Washington also told the Foreign Office that they had been 'flooded with copies' of a letter decrying West Pakistan's 'systematic genocide' against Bengalis.<sup>320</sup> 'We thought it best to consult you, since this letter may be part of a world-wide "Bangla Desh" lobbying campaign and you may already have decided our line of reply'.<sup>321</sup> The Foreign Office responded:

We have of course been flooded with letters on this subject here from members of the public, and it has been our policy not to reply at all. Sheer weight of numbers would have precluded us from sending individual replies, and...a stereotype reply which did not answer the points raised in individual letters would do more harm than good.

Hence they instructed Washington to 'follow our practice of leaving the majority unanswered',<sup>322</sup> effectively not reacting to allegations of state-endorsed atrocities (apart from defensively) in a manner that was to be characteristic of the Foreign Office throughout the affair.

To the government's consternation, the opposition, led by former Prime Minister Harold Wilson, persisted in raising the matter: 'The whole House and...all our constituents throughout the country regard this in terms of sheer scale as the worst human tragedy that the world has known since the war, apart from war itself',<sup>323</sup> 'There is some feeling in this country that there seems to have been a lack of urgency over this

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<sup>318</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Letters to the Secretary of State about East Pakistan', SAD—FCO, 25 June 1971.

<sup>319</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Letters to the Secretary of State about East Pakistan', SAD—FCO, 25 June 1971.

<sup>320</sup> FCO 37/889. Letter 'Bangla Desh', Washington—SAD and FCO, 28 June 1971.

<sup>321</sup> FCO 37/889. Letter 'Bangla Desh', Washington—SAD and FCO, 28 June 1971.

<sup>322</sup> FCO 37/889. Reply to Letter 'Bangla Desh', SAD—Washington, 6 July 1971.

<sup>323</sup> FCO 37/889. Harold Wilson, supplementary questions to the Prime Minister's Statement, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, cols. 865-866, 8 June 1971.

matter...[and] rather too much concern with “protocolaire”.<sup>324</sup> International observers, Wilson had proclaimed earlier, should be sent ‘to provide some guarantee that there was no genocide’ and ‘report to the world outside about conditions in East Pakistan and about the very grave accusations of murder of civilian populations’.<sup>325</sup>

Finally, on 15 June 1971, John Stonehouse, the Labour MP for Wednesbury, submitted a motion to condemn violence in East Pakistan explicitly as genocide and a threat to world peace punishable under international law. Signed by 210 MPs (out of 630), the motion ‘Genocide in East Bengal and the Recognition of Bangladesh’ proclaimed:

the widespread murder of civilians and the atrocities on a massive scale by the Pakistan Army in East Bengal, contrary to the United Nations Convention on Genocide signed by Pakistan itself, confirms that the military government of Pakistan has forfeited all rights to rule East Bengal...; therefore...the United Nations Security Council must be called urgently to consider the situation both as a threat to international peace and as a contravention of the Genocide Convention.<sup>326</sup>

The Foreign Office, obliged to heed allegations of genocide in East Pakistan, swiftly contacted its UN Economic and Social Department for an analysis. The analysis, which was included in its entirety in the Foreign Secretary’s 23 June East Pakistan debate notes, provides several succinct—but only partial—insights into the British government’s perceptions of the conflict.<sup>327</sup> Pakistan, it begins, ratified the Genocide Convention in 1957; the UK ratified in 1970.<sup>328</sup> Article V outlines one of the signatories’ central duties: “to provide effective penalties for persons guilty of

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<sup>324</sup> FCO 37/889. Harold Wilson, supplementary questions to the Prime Minister’s Statement, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, cols. 865-867, 8 June 1971.

<sup>325</sup> PREM 15/568. Harold Wilson, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 945, 20 April 1971.

<sup>326</sup> FCO 37/888. Early Day Motion 592 ‘Genocide in East Bengal and the Recognition of Bangladesh’, 15 June 1971; enclosed in notes prepared for the Foreign Secretary’s use at the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan. (Appendix Documents 9a and 9b)

<sup>327</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion: ‘Pakistan: The Genocide Convention’, UN Economic and Social Department—SAD, 17 June 1971. (Appendix Documents 10a and 10b)

<sup>328</sup> For a discussion of the historic political and legal debates that ultimately led to Britain’s ratification, see Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 32-64, and A. W. Brian Simpson, ‘Britain and the Genocide Convention’, *British Yearbook of International Law*, vol. 73 (2003): 5-64.

genocide”<sup>329</sup> Britain, Pakistan and all other contracting parties were under this obligation in 1971.

Under Article IX, disputes between states about the Convention, ‘including...the responsibility of a state for genocide, shall be submitted to the International Court of Justice at the request of any of the Parties of the dispute’.<sup>330</sup> Before the Convention was passed, however, several countries including India (but not the UK or Pakistan) made the problematic reservation that ‘the agreement of all Parties to the dispute was essential’—including the state accused.<sup>331</sup>

If a person (not a state) is charged with genocide, Article VI stipulates that they may be tried either by a state tribunal in the territory where the crime was committed, or by an international penal tribunal. However, the analysis pointed out, ‘there is, as yet, no international penal tribunal’, and as a British expert had recently noted, ‘the effective implementation of the Genocide Convention and the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 depended upon the establishment of an international penal tribunal. No one has ever been tried by a Government specifically for a breach of any of these Conventions’.<sup>332</sup>

After all:

genocide was not a crime which an individual could commit, or indeed a small group of individuals. It was a crime which could only be committed with the resources available to Governments and if genocide was committed within the state of a Contracting Party it was...nonsense to suppose...that there would be a trial ‘by a competent tribunal of the state in the territory of which the act was committed’.<sup>333</sup>

In light of these considerations:

It could be held that events in East Pakistan show that the Government of Pakistan are in breach of the Genocide Convention; it would certainly be difficult to argue they are not. But the question is academic since the other Government most closely involved, India, will not bring the matter to the International Court for the reasons explained above [i.e. it is doubtful Pakistan would agree to appear]—and it is highly unlikely that any other Government will attempt to do so.<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Quoted in FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

<sup>330</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

<sup>331</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

<sup>332</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

<sup>333</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

<sup>334</sup> FCO 37/888. Internal legal opinion, 17 June 1971.

The UN department of the Foreign Office concluded that the Pakistani army's actions in its Eastern province may have constituted a systematic attempt to destroy Bengalis—'it would certainly be difficult to argue they are not'. However, only governments 'closely involved' (a category the British apparently did not feel they belonged to) could reasonably have been expected to pursue such allegations. Such pursuit was impossible, in any case, in the absence of an international penal tribunal. By focusing exclusively on the difficulties of pursuing alleged breaches of the Genocide Convention (effectively disregarding other obligations and options open to signatories<sup>335</sup>), this narrow reading provided the British with added justification to refrain from acting overtly against the Pakistani administration. And if parliamentarians pressured them to reconsider the matter, the Foreign Secretary's private notes provided him with prepared replies to defend the government's position:

*Situation in East Pakistan*

1. [If pressed] We cannot, from direct evidence available to me, confirm allegations of army brutality against Hindus in East Pakistan.

*Genocide*

18. It would serve no useful purpose to raise the matter under the Genocide Convention. Under Article VI of the Convention, persons charged with genocide are in the first instance to be tried either by a competent tribunal of the state in the territory of which the act was committed or by an international penal tribunal. There is as yet no international penal tribunal. (We have pointed out that the effective implementation of the Convention is dependent upon the establishment of such a tribunal.)<sup>336</sup>

The government, having concluded that pursuing allegations of genocide was pointless under current circumstances, did not analyse the matter from this perspective further, apart from on one other occasion (addressed below). The Labour Party motion, according to parliamentary custom, was not debated despite repeated requests to do so by the opposition. 'An "Early Day" Motion is not normally debated unless the Government provide time for it', the Parliamentary Clerk informed officials who were

<sup>335</sup> As contained in Article I and Article VIII of the Convention.

<sup>336</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Notes for supplementaries' prepared for the Foreign Secretary's use at the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan. (Appendix Documents 11a and 11b)



preparing a brief to the Leader of the House on Motion 592.<sup>337</sup> ‘Members who support the objects of this Motion are likely to press the Leader of the House...to provide Government time for a debate. He will usually want to refuse politely’.<sup>338</sup>

Labour’s pressure on Heath, to be certain, was rooted in opposition party politics. As Peter Catterall points out in the preface to *The Labour Party in Opposition, 1970-1974*, parties in opposition are ‘reduced...to reacting to policies they do not make with as much intellectual and ideological coherence as they can muster....In the power vacuum of opposition,...policy options are frequently the only bones to chew over’.<sup>339</sup> Commenting on this observation, former Labour leader Michael Foot (a member of the Shadow Cabinet in 1971), conceded that although the party may have taken advantage of the conflict to embarrass and pressure their parliamentary rivals, they did not view events (especially alleged atrocities against civilians) in purely instrumental terms.<sup>340</sup> Rather, he maintained, Labour called on the Heath administration to take a stronger stance on the crisis because it was keenly felt that there were moral obligations to do so, and several party members sympathised with India, a country with socialist leanings, then severely burdened by the refugee exodus from East Pakistan. Many, moreover, had been concerned about instability in Pakistan for years, and feared the conflict in the East would trigger major regional dislocation extending well beyond the borders of the subcontinent.<sup>341</sup>

This mixture of motives, it would appear, led Labour MPs to continue urging the government to take firm action against Pakistan’s leadership throughout the crisis, and John Stonehouse in particular, continued to depict the army campaign as a

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<sup>337</sup> FCO 37/888. ‘Early Day Motion’, Parliamentary Clerk—SAD, 16 June 1971; ‘Early Day Motion No. 592: Brief for the Leader of the House’, FCO—Parliamentary Unit, 16 June 1971.

<sup>338</sup> FCO 37/888. ‘Early Day Motion’, Parliamentary Clerk—SAD, 16 June 1971.

<sup>339</sup> Patrick Bell, *The Labour Party in Opposition 1970-1974*, British Politics and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), Series Editor’s Preface, xi. Bell’s work does not discuss foreign affairs at any length (the 1971 South Asia crisis is not referred to), but focuses instead on contemporary internal divisions within the Labour Party.

<sup>340</sup> Michael Foot, Personal Interview by author, 27 April 2009, London UK.

<sup>341</sup> Michael Foot, Interview by author, 27 April 2009.

contravention of international humanitarian law. ‘I believe that there is an opportunity for the international community to play its part in reducing the atrocities which are undoubtedly taking place,’ Stonehouse insisted in Commons on 4 November 1971.<sup>342</sup>

Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions relating to armed conflicts not of an international character,<sup>343</sup> he went on, provided that “Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms...shall...be treated humanely, without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex...or any other similar criteria”.<sup>344</sup>

‘We know,’ Stonehouse declared, ‘that the Convention is not being adhered to by the Pakistan Army....From reports coming out of East Bengal, we know that when a bridge is blown up or a road is mined or there is an attack on Pakistan Army units, the Pakistan Army is going out to nearby villages and destroying them, killing the men, [and] raping the women....Every day, 20,000 to 30,000 people are crossing the frontier...because of the atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistan Army in its attempt to “pacify” the area that it would like to control. This is illegal conduct’.<sup>345</sup>

In response to these allegations, on 16 December, the last day of the Indo-Pakistani war, the UN Department of the Foreign Office issued a second legal opinion ‘for the record’: ‘Although the morality of the Pakistanis claim is, to say the least, questionable, they can claim that, in November, there was no “armed conflict” in East Pakistan and that their army was merely quelling “dissidents”....In these circumstances,

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<sup>342</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/1016 entitled ‘Civil Unrest in Bangladesh: Persecution of non-Bengalis in Bangladesh’. Labour MP John Stonehouse, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, cols. 384-385, 4 November 1971.

<sup>343</sup> Article 3’s use of ‘not of an international character’, largely connotative of civil war, was left intentionally vague according to the International Commission of Jurists, so as to keep the scope of the article as wide as possible (*Legal Study*, ‘Part IV: Legal Position under International Penal Law’).

<sup>344</sup> FCO 37/1016. MP John Stonehouse quoting the Geneva Conventions, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, cols. 384-385, 4 November 1971.

<sup>345</sup> FCO 37/1016. MP John Stonehouse, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, cols. 384-385, 4 November 1971.

the answer to Mr. Stonehouse's assertion "this is illegal conduct"...is "not so, so far as the terms of the Geneva Conventions are concerned".<sup>346</sup> As for Britain:

The suggestion...that HMG should exert pressure on the Government of Pakistan to adhere to the Geneva Conventions might, if pressed, have caused us embarrassment. Under Article 1...'The high contracting parties undertake...to ensure respect for the present Convention in all circumstances'....It could...be argued that the words 'in all circumstances' oblige us to press governments in the way Mr Stonehouse suggests. Had Mr Stonehouse pressed his point, we would presumably have refused to intervene with the Pakistan authorities, because we lack the power to intervene effectively, because we interpret Article 1 more narrowly, and because...[it] would have harmed HMG's interests in Pakistan. However reasonable this answer may be, it might well have precipitated public controversy.<sup>347</sup>

Such controversy, no doubt, would have been particularly unwelcome in view of the Department's conclusion that:

it is arguable that the activities of the Pakistan armed forces in East Pakistan constituted a form of genocide, as defined in Article II of the Convention....Moreover, Article VIII states that 'any contracting party may call upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action under the UN Charter as they consider appropriate for the prevention and suppression of acts of genocide...'. It has been open to Mr Stonehouse to press HMG to take action against Pakistan in the United Nations under the Genocide Convention. Fortunately he has not asked us to do so.<sup>348</sup>

The Foreign Office's second analysis of the question of genocide in East Pakistan and other crimes under international humanitarian law refers directly to a state's options and obligations to pursue alleged violations. In the case of genocide, this was to be done by means of the (vague) route of 'call[ing] upon the competent organs of the United Nations to take such action...as they consider appropriate'. This stands in contrast to the earlier analysis, which made little mention of (and in fact, seemingly ignored) such obligations and recourses. Regardless of their differences, both analyses propound a similarly narrow reading of the duties required of signatories in the face of state-endorsed atrocities, which in the case of East Pakistan, both agree likely constituted a form of genocide.

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<sup>346</sup> FCO 37/1016. Internal legal opinion: applicability of the UN Genocide Convention and the 1949 Geneva Conventions to Pakistan, FCO UN Economic and Social Department—SAD, 16 December 1971.

<sup>347</sup> FCO 37/1016. Internal legal opinion, 16 December 1971.

<sup>348</sup> FCO 37/1016. Internal legal opinion, 16 December 1971. Another official noted in handwriting at the bottom of this document that he agrees with the 'analysis of this question which has, perhaps fortunately for us, been...overtaken by events'. (Appendix Document 12)

The Foreign Office's restrictive interpretation of international humanitarian law supported the Heath government's basic unwillingness to acknowledge crimes committed by the Pakistani state. The government's refusal to do so was largely based on an attempt to legitimize their commitment to non-interference, fuelled by concerns for national interests, a general sense of impotency, and fear of adverse consequences; yet it was also linked to their perception of the crisis as a civil war or armed struggle on 'both sides'. For the conclusion that the Pakistani government may have been guilty of genocide was simply not enough to counteract the impression made by multiple intelligence reports that described *not only* systematic violence by the army, but *also* spontaneous violence committed by and against various parties in East Pakistan.

Indeed, according to some of these reports, even the initial crackdown on East Pakistan (arguably the most methodical portion of the repression) was particularly ruthless because it 'was more revenge than purely military action' for earlier atrocities committed by Bengalis during periods of political agitation.<sup>349</sup> Thus, notwithstanding the Foreign Office's two incriminating assessments of the situation, the official explanation remained both publicly and (for the most part) privately:

A punitive campaign of some brutality was waged in which the intention was clearly to cow the Bengalis into submission and to impose complete and direct army control over the province. Atrocities have since been committed by both sides and communal violence has been rife; old quarrels between Muslims and Hindus, and between Bengalis and the Bihari Muslims...have been revived.<sup>350</sup>

Variations of this description of civil war—similar to that of the Foreign Secretary's to Cabinet<sup>351</sup>—appeared regularly in British files throughout the crisis. It also appeared, nearly verbatim, in a Foreign Office brief to the British parliamentary delegation which

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<sup>349</sup> FCO 37/888. 28 May 1971 Confederation of British Industry Report. Copy enclosed in Letter, Dacca—FCO, 14 June 1971.

<sup>350</sup> FCO 37/889. Brief No. 4: 'The Situation in East Pakistan' (notes for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting, London, 1 July 1971), n. d. June 1971.

<sup>351</sup> CAB 128/49. Cabinet Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> conclusion, 5th minute, 22 April 1971.

toured Pakistan and India from June to July 1971, and to the British delegation to the September 1971 Inter-Parliamentary Conference.<sup>352</sup>

In light of this interpretation, openly condemning the systematic aspects of the army's actions, reprehensible as these may have been, would not only have jeopardised British interests, it would have promoted a distorted picture of the conflict and placed undue emphasis on the actions of a sovereign government. As former British civil servants contend: a diplomat has the responsibility to judge what the best means are to achieve a desired outcome, and the most effective tool is usually discreet diplomacy, that is, soft approaches and subtle messages. How useful would accusations, sanctions, or legal action under the Genocide Convention have been to resolve brutality for which, at the time, there was no clear responsibility? Ultimately, what the British did not acknowledge was that casting the crisis as primarily a civil war promoted an equally distorted account of events.

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<sup>352</sup> FCO 37/889. Brief No. 4: 'The Situation in East Pakistan' (notes for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting, London, 1 July 1971), n. d. June 1971; 'Pakistan: Political Background Brief', FCO—British Parliamentary Delegation, n. d. June 1971 (source: Jessel Personal Papers); FCO 37/890. 'Pakistan: Background Brief' (for the British delegation to the Annual Inter-Parliamentary Conference, Paris, 2-10 September 1971), 13 August 1971.

### iii. AID

Intent upon maintaining distance and not interfering, the Heath administration's principal (publicised) activity with regard to the East Pakistan crisis was in the fields of development aid and charitable humanitarian relief. Needless to say, the two while overlapping in some respects, are distinct activities. All the same, Meghna Guhathakurta notes that long-term development aid is often mistakenly viewed as a form of charity the basic purpose of which is humanitarian. 'Although it is possible to conceive of an element of humanitarian concern in British aid policy to Bangladesh, especially in cases of immediate response to disasters and natural calamities where the negotiations and mediation of different interests are kept minimal due to the immediacy of the need, most long-term aid cannot be termed humanitarian'.<sup>353</sup> The following section describes and analyses Britain's aid-related activities in 1971 with these distinctions in mind.

#### ***Humanitarian relief aid***

British intelligence in May indicated a major refugee crisis was gathering on East Pakistan's borders with the Indian provinces of Tripura, Assam and West Bengal. The Foreign Secretary told Cabinet that according to Indian estimates, over three million East Pakistanis had already fled: 'Nearly all the refugees were Hindus; and the flow to West Bengal would not be reversed until the fear of persecution had subsided....There was considerable concern in this country about the[ir] plight'.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Meghna Guhathakurta, *The Politics of British Aid to Bangladesh: An Analytical Model* (Dhaka: Dana Publishers, 1990), 13, 331.

<sup>354</sup> CAB 128/49. Alec Douglas-Home, 29<sup>th</sup> conclusion (3<sup>rd</sup> minute), 27 May 1971.



**MAP B:**  
**Location of Refugee Camps in Indian provinces bordering East Pakistan, November 1971**<sup>355</sup>

HMG officials, under public and parliamentary pressure to respond to one of the era's greatest population displacements, debated what to do. Should they send relief aid to India? Would such an undertaking offend Pakistan's leadership? Finally, would aid *create* refugees? Would it, as the High Commissioner in Islamabad feared, 'act as a magnet to induce very large population movements which may leave the international community saddled with a refugee responsibility comparable to that in the Middle East'? <sup>356</sup>

<sup>355</sup> Source: UNHCR, 'Rupture in South Asia', Chapter 3, in *The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (UNHCR: 2001), 61.

<sup>356</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 759 'Relief', Islamabad—FCO, 6 May 71.

British officials in India disagreed: 'Aid provided in camps is only bare minimum at best and is unlikely to attract refugees not under further compulsions of fear of fighting, army retaliation or sheer destitution. Those who have seen camps say they are places of utter human misery, with Indian administration unable to cope and on verge of collapse'.<sup>357</sup> British Oxfam workers similarly described how a 'high proportion of refugees in areas visited appeared to be women and children including many Hindus. Some refugees had been shot and others looted by Pakistan Army while making for the border. Primary motive of flight appeared to be continuing fear of massacre by Army. Certainly none could have been attracted by meagre relief available in Indian camps'.<sup>358</sup>

Satisfied that sending relief aid would not aggravate the crisis, HMG began discreetly assisting British charities in the region with transport, medical supplies and trained staff. In June, they donated £1 million in cash and £750,000 worth of food to the UNHCR, the focal point of a newly mounted 'strictly humanitarian' UN-NGO operation, which aimed to assist the Indian government in caring for the millions crowding its borders.<sup>359</sup> India 'faced with a problem of refugees which distorts her economy and stretches her resources to the limit and beyond,' declared Douglas-Home in support of the operation at the UN General Assembly, '....[had] rightly asked for international help'.<sup>360</sup> By the end of the month, HMG's relief contributions totalled £8m which represented 30-40% of total donations at the time; this, the FCO noted, far exceeded that of any other Western European country.<sup>361</sup>

The UN Secretary General, also in June, managed to establish a counterpart

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<sup>357</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 126, Calcutta—FCO, 7 May 1971.

<sup>358</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 294, Calcutta—FCO, 10 May 1971.

<sup>359</sup> FCO 37/887. British Foreign Secretary, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 8 June 1971; PREM 15/569. Transcript of 'Secretary of State's Interview on [BBC] Panorama on 7 June [1971]'.

<sup>360</sup> 'Speech by Alec Douglas-Home to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 1971', in *Current British Foreign Policy: Documents, Statements, Speeches 1971*, eds. J. Mayall and D. C. Watt (London: Temple Smith, 1973), 857-858.

<sup>361</sup> FCO 37/889. Brief No. 4: 'The Situation in East Pakistan' (notes for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting, London, 1 July 1971), 23 June 1971.



operation in East Pakistan—UNEPRO (UN East Pakistan Relief Operation)—to distribute international aid to the internally displaced. This system of twin centres of relief, one in the crisis zone and another on the periphery, apparently set a precedent for United Nations refugee assistance operations and would come to be known as the ‘dual agency’ method.<sup>362</sup> Britain extended contributions to this project as well, carefully reiterating at the UN that the international community’s responsibility to the region was strictly humanitarian, not political: ‘Reconstruction of the constitution of Pakistan must be an internal matter for the people of Pakistan....Meanwhile, let the United Nations do the humanitarian work. It must never be said of the politicians that we met here and argued about who was to distribute food, while millions of innocent people starved’.<sup>363</sup> By September, just three months after the inception of both relief drives, the government had contributed £14.75 million to the UNHCR and £2 million to UNEPRO for food, medicine and transport in East Pakistan, representing nearly one-fifth of the total world contribution.

Foreign Office officials recommended the government adopt this relatively generous relief aid policy after regularly assessing Britain’s ‘chance of feeding, housing and generally caring for the population’<sup>364</sup> affected by violence on the subcontinent. Indeed, officials frequently expressed the hope that the Prime Minister’s diplomatic representations to India and Pakistan might help to stabilise the political situation, so that Britain could focus on the enormous humanitarian tasks at hand. ‘If we could do that,’ officials told Downing Street, ‘at least we would be dealing with two separate and distinct problems: a) the care of the refugees in India b) the relief and rehabilitation of the population of East Pakistan’.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> See Susan F. Martin, ‘Forced migration and the evolving humanitarian regime’, in *New Issues in Refugee Research*, 5 July 2000, 19-20.

<sup>363</sup> ‘Speech by Alec Douglas-Home to the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 29 September 1971’, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 857-858.

<sup>364</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971.

<sup>365</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971. (Appendix Document 18)

While it is evident that officials were concerned for the basic life conditions of civilians, it is also true that their relief efforts were a strategy to appease public opinion and placate elements of the domestic sector that were pressuring for stronger action. As the Foreign Secretary alerted Cabinet early on in the conflict, the refugee crisis was worsening and ‘public opinion in this country would expect the Government to be taking some action to alleviate their suffering’.<sup>366</sup> Similarly, after Britain’s first donations to international relief efforts in the middle of the year, officials worried intensely about how to:

stimulate the United Nations into more rapid and visible assistance measures. It is a week since we made our contribution of £1m to U Thant’s fund and so far there is very little public sign of any action. Public and Parliamentary concern for evidence of effective steps is growing. Unless the United Nations can plainly be seen to be playing its part, there is bound to be pressure on us to act unilaterally, which we are not anxious to do.<sup>367</sup>

If we could indicate quickly that we should be prepared to make further substantial contributions to relieve the impact of the disaster on a once and for all basis, the Foreign Secretary told Cabinet, the pressure of public opinion would be reduced.<sup>368</sup>

Fortunately for the government, the concern was a passing one—attempts to publicise its efforts, including television appearances by relevant ministers, were a success. ‘Bearing in mind the smallness of our contribution in relation to the scale of the problem’, one official proudly reported to the Prime Minister, ‘we have in fact been getting good credit including repeated mention in the radio and television bulletins...and the newspapers are very well aware of what we have done’.<sup>369</sup>

And what the government did, at least in terms of relief aid, appeared significant. The British were one of the largest donors in 1971, and so felt satisfied with their efforts. In all frankness, Douglas-Home communicated privately to British

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<sup>366</sup> CAB 128/49. Alec Douglas-Home, Cabinet Meeting 23<sup>rd</sup> conclusion (2<sup>nd</sup> minute), 29 April 1971.

<sup>367</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, 10 Downing Street—FCO, 2 June 1971.

<sup>368</sup> CAB 128/49. Alec Douglas-Home, Cabinet Meeting 32<sup>nd</sup> conclusion (2<sup>nd</sup> minute), 17 June 1971.

<sup>369</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, department unknown—10 Downing Street, 6 June 1971.

diplomats, '[w]e regard that as more than our fair share of the burden. Many other countries have not pulled their weight'.<sup>370</sup>

### ***Development aid***

HMG, apart from charitable relief donations, decided to use long-term development aid as a power lever with which to exercise pressure on the Khan government. Britain, in 1971, was a member of the 'Aid to Pakistan Consortium', an association created a decade earlier by the World Bank to foster coordination between the country's major development aid donors.<sup>371</sup> The body was widely acknowledged by Foreign Office officials to 'possess the greatest influence'<sup>372</sup> on Pakistan, but the UK and other members had remained hesitant to wield it until the gravity of the crisis and related public pressure rendered it seemingly necessary. So it was that at their next meeting in June 1971, members collectively agreed not to renew funding (Britain had pledged £10 million the previous year) until the emergency in the Eastern wing had abated. 'There can be no question of new British aid to Pakistan,' announced the Foreign Secretary in Parliament, 'until we have firm evidence that real progress is being made towards a political settlement'.<sup>373</sup>

Many parliamentarians and members of the public applauded the decision. 'Even in normal circumstances, this would have been a very serious blow to the Pakistan economy', declared a former Labour Minister for Overseas Development and

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<sup>370</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 242 'Relief Aid to India and Pakistan and British Policy on Aid to Pakistan', FCO—Paris, NY, Islamabad, Washington, Geneva, 21 October 1971.

<sup>371</sup> These were Canada, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. For an analysis of the organisation's long-term effects on Pakistan's economy, see Asma Salman and Hui Xiao Feng, 'Foreign Aid to Pakistan: Impact on GDP', paper presented at the *2009 European Allied Business Research & College Teaching and Learning Conferences*, Prague Czech Republic, 8-11 June 2009, [http://www.cluteinstitute.com/Programs/Prague\\_2009/Article%20441.pdf](http://www.cluteinstitute.com/Programs/Prague_2009/Article%20441.pdf) (last accessed 5 September 2010).

<sup>372</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 10 June 1971.

<sup>373</sup> FCO 37/888. British Foreign Secretary, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 23 June 1971.

member of the June-July 1971 India/Pakistan parliamentary delegation.<sup>374</sup> ‘The group of generals who run Pakistan know very little about economics, but sooner or later the hard facts of the situation may compel them to change course. It is our only hope...it is wrong to attach political conditions to aid in 99 cases out of a 100—but this is the 100th case. Any power lever must be used which might help to bring about a political settlement’.<sup>375</sup>

The suspension, combined with the British media’s critical coverage and disparaging statements made by MPs in Parliament, damaged Anglo-Pakistani relations. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry sent British officials indignant notes ‘invit[ing] attention to the persistent anti-Pakistan activities being conducted in Great Britain’.<sup>376</sup> Britain’s announcement to withhold aid, the Ministry argued, ‘cannot be reconciled with the officially stated attitude of the British government that the situation in East Pakistan is an internal affair of Pakistan’.<sup>377</sup> ‘The sum total of all official and non-official statements and activities taking place in Great Britain, directed against the very existence of Pakistan, leave one wondering whether there is any meaning and substance left in Commonwealth association’.<sup>378</sup>

Edward Heath had been aware that Britain’s decision on aid was likely to provoke a negative reaction in Pakistan—although not necessarily to this degree. He swiftly refuted the ‘anti-Pakistan’ accusations by writing to President Khan: ‘I am...disturbed by the gap which seems to have been opening between our two governments. It is particularly disappointing that our policy on aid to the people of Pakistan is criticised as an attempt to encroach on the internal affairs of Pakistan’.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> Reginald Prentice, ‘The Repression of Bengal’, *The Sunday Times* (London), 11 July 1971.

<sup>375</sup> Reginald Prentice, ‘The Repression of Bengal’.

<sup>376</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1372 enclosing text of 1<sup>st</sup> Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs note, Islamabad—FCO, 3 July 1971. (Appendix Documents 16a and 16b)

<sup>377</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1372, Islamabad—FCO, 3 July 1971.

<sup>378</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1372, Islamabad—FCO, 3 July 1971; see also PREM 15/569. Telegram 1374 enclosing text of 2<sup>nd</sup> Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs note, Islamabad—FCO, 5 July 1971.

<sup>379</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 1360, FCO—Islamabad, 29 July 1971.

‘To say that we cannot launch new development aid programmes until the political and economic framework for them exists is no more than a matter of common sense, it is certainly not an attempt to “interfere” in your internal affairs’.<sup>380</sup>

Anglo-Pakistani relations, already strained by the crisis, reached ‘an all time low’.<sup>381</sup> British officials tried to repair the damage, and even considered resuming development aid unilaterally. The Foreign Secretary, for his part, sought to ‘reassure the Pakistan Government that there had been no recent change in HMG’s policies’, namely that ‘the nature of a political settlement is a matter for the Pakistanis themselves’.<sup>382</sup> ‘The trouble is psychological,’ Prime Minister Heath wrote on internal communication. ‘Saying no further aid without a political settlement *looked* like public pressure. We cd [sic] just have gone on considering new projects—which were unlikely because there is so much unused’.<sup>383</sup> Officials, however tempted they may have been to reverse the decision, were under significant public and parliamentary pressure to sustain it. Moreover, they believed that the measure, controversial though it was, stood a chance of facilitating a return to peace on the subcontinent: ‘One of the few effective levers on the Pakistan Government...is economic aid,’ the Foreign Secretary underscored to Cabinet, ‘and...the Pakistan Consortium should...maintain its stand on no new commodity aid’.<sup>384</sup> Accordingly, HMG did not renew allocations to the country that year. Britain’s withholding development assistance during the crisis was the most overt action it took to exercise influence on the Khan administration and respond to public opinion.

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<sup>380</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath’s 29 July 1971 message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 1360.

<sup>381</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1416 ‘British Commercial Interests in Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 8 July 1971.

<sup>382</sup> FCO 37/890. ‘Pakistan: Note for the Secretary of State’s Use in Cabinet’, SAD—FCO, 2 August 1971.

<sup>383</sup> PREM 15/569. Edward Heath’s handwritten annotation on Letter, FCO—10 Downing Street, 2 August 1971; emphasis added.

<sup>384</sup> CAB 148/117. ‘India and Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’, 18 October 1971.

***Summary: limitations to British aid policy***

Britain withheld development aid and donated relief aid to assist civilians affected by the crisis, to advance the prospect of a political resolution in Pakistan, and to reduce pressure on HMG to take stronger (potentially unilateral) action. These measures, it would seem, were generally successful in appeasing the British public and the Heath administration expressed satisfaction with its courses of action—particularly its commendable position as a major relief donor.

Yet it should be noted that neither Britain's charitable relief contributions, nor those of other states, were enough to effectively alleviate the suffering of civilians affected by the crisis. In fact, refugees from East Pakistan and the internally displaced continued to struggle under dire living conditions throughout the year, precisely because governments around the world, including those of Pakistan and India, did not fully support the UN relief efforts in place. Indeed, the issue became a frequent matter of debate amongst British parliamentarians. In East Pakistan, some pointed out, martial law authorities were refusing entry to international shipments. Once inside the province, distribution depended on the Pakistani army, which the international community knew was otherwise engaged. Finally, aid personnel could not move freely because of the ruinous state of the province's infrastructure.<sup>385</sup> Indian representatives, meanwhile consistently rebuffed international assistance, preferring to run the camps themselves. As one Foreign Office official put it, 'both the Indians and the Pakistanis are reluctant to accept a larger international presence, the Indians because it would inhibit them from helping the guerrillas, the Pakistanis because it would inhibit the army's activities in East Pakistan'.<sup>386</sup> Finally, UN member states, as with many matters related to the Pakistan crisis, could not agree (in this case, on what type of humanitarian

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<sup>385</sup> These impediments were discussed at length during the 11 and 14 May 1971 House of Commons debates (see *Hansard* transcripts in FCO 37/887).

<sup>386</sup> FCO 37/889. 'Pakistan: Note for the Secretary of State's Use in Cabinet on 8 July', SAD—FCO, 7 July 1971; the UNHCR's 'Rupture in South Asia' also refers to India's refusals of UN-NGO assistance (61).

effort should be mounted), and therefore refrained from acting decisively.

In reaction to the paralysis, a *Sunday Telegraph* journalist who toured West Bengal during the summer of 1971, lamented having witnessed:

an endless sodden column [of refugees] tramp silently past....They will still be marching during the British Sunday breakfast, the British Sunday lunch and the Sunday evening snack in front of the television feature film. Hindu and Moslems mingled, their only sin being that they were Bengali Hindus and Bengali Moslems....[T]he west has condemned and deplored, but has largely stood aloof. Even the well-intentioned relief efforts of the West have become bogged down in the monsoon mud. The sterling from London, the dollars from Washington and the tonnages from Geneva look fine on paper. It is simply that there is not a Bengali refugee in India who is better fed, more adequately sheltered or healthier than he was two months ago.<sup>387</sup>

Against the background of international apathy, it was in fact the UN Secretary General, U Thant, who took it upon himself to establish both UNEPRO and the UNHCR operation using his good offices.<sup>388</sup> In an account by an aid-worker who participated, 'U Thant emerges as a heroic figure, refusing to be neutral on humanitarian issues, constantly searching for a way over or around political obstacles, receiving little support from the great powers'.<sup>389</sup> Once the relief operations were finally in place, however, most states feared that supporting either of them could be misinterpreted as sympathy for India, or criticism of Pakistan. Thus UNEPRO 'by no means ended the political difficulties. In fact, it was not until December...that the way was open to mount the operation that the situation called for. The best that can be said for the stumbling and frustrated efforts of UNEPRO was that it laid the basis for its successor, the [1972] United Nations Relief Operation in Dacca (UNROD) and its impressive achievements....The contribution which U Thant had pleaded for in vain now came pouring in'.<sup>390</sup>

The UN-led humanitarian relief and rehabilitation drive, in other words, began during 1971, but operated freely—and with full collaboration—only *after* the conflict,

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<sup>387</sup> Peter Gill, 'Still No End to Bengal Flight', *The Sunday Telegraph* (London), 25 July 1971. Reprinted in *Bangladesh Documents*, vol. 1, 483-484.

<sup>388</sup> Martin 'Forced migration', 20.

<sup>389</sup> J. King Gordon, review of *The United Nations in Bangladesh*, by Thomas W. Oliver, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 4 (1979-1980): 709.

<sup>390</sup> Gordon *The United Nations in Bangladesh* (book review), 709.

when nearly \$1.3 billion of humanitarian aid and “as many as 72 foreign relief groups, including UN agencies, contributed to what observers considered the largest single and most successful emergency relief endeavour of...[the] era”.<sup>391</sup> While these efforts deserve due recognition, the sequence of events in which they occurred lay bare the geopolitical complexities of international humanitarian aid in emergency situations, and put Britain’s self-lauded role as a leading contributor of such aid in perspective. They support the impression that HMG acted, not only to help the millions whose lives were disrupted by violence on the subcontinent, but also to a great extent, to appease public opinion by being seen to act, exhibiting less concern about whether those actions were solidly beneficial than whether they had furnished the government with ‘good credit’.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Charles Peter O’Donnell, as quoted in Jahan ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’, 305; ‘Rupture in South Asia’ also documents the efficacy of international relief efforts in the aftermath of the conflict (UNHCR, 68-71).

<sup>392</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter, department unknown—10 Downing Street, 6 June 1971.



#### iv. NEUTRALITY & NON-INTERVENTION

*'There was never any question...of outside interference in the internal affairs of an independent Commonwealth country'.*

— Edward Heath<sup>393</sup>

British officials, whatever assistance they offered or pressure they sought to exert during the conflict, were always careful to demonstrate that their ultimate allegiance was to the international norms of neutrality and non-interference. Hence the narrow interpretation of their obligations under the Genocide Convention and the Foreign Secretary's repeated declaration: 'Her Majesty's Government have no intention of interfering in Pakistan's internal affairs, and I wish again to emphasise that this is our position...intervention from outside will only complicate a very difficult and distressing situation'.<sup>394</sup>

Internal notes prepared for senior ministers reflect the government's preoccupation with non-intervention. Before the last debate on East Pakistan, for example, as Commons prepared to adjourn for the summer, the Foreign Office worried that some MPs might claim that the explosive situation on the subcontinent warranted staying in session. The South Asia Department advised the Leader of the House, William Whitelaw, to dismiss all such demands with a preptory 'Line to Take'. 'In so far as events in Pakistan are concerned,' the line ran, 'Her Majesty's Government has no standing to intervene directly'.<sup>395</sup> The Foreign Secretary's draft statements and preparatory notes for Commons contained particularly colourful replies to defend the government's position:

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<sup>393</sup> Heath on the East Pakistan crisis in *The Course of My Life: My Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), 485.

<sup>394</sup> FCO 37/887. Alec Douglas Home, Statement to the House of Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 5 April 1971. The Foreign Secretary made similar statements on 29 March, 11 May, 9 June, 23 June and 4 November 1971. See *Hansard* clippings in FCO 37/887, FCO 37/888, FCO 37/889 and 'Speech by Sir Alec Douglas-Home to Parliament, 4 November 1971', in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 974.

<sup>395</sup> FCO 37/890. 'Summer Adjournment Debate', Parliamentary Unit—SAD, 23 July 1971; FCO 37/890. 'Line to Take', SAD—Parliamentary Unit, 26 July 1971.

*The Crisis in East Pakistan is no Longer Solely a Matter for the Pakistan Government*

(a) Insofar as events within Pakistan are concerned HM Government has no standing to intervene directly.

(b) I am sure that the Hon Member is not suggesting that we should invade Pakistan; but that is what his question implies.<sup>396</sup>

*East Pakistan and the Security Council*

There is no indication that a situation exists in the area in which it would be appropriate for the United Nations to intervene in a peace-keeping role.<sup>397</sup>

To propound the theory that there should be unilateral intervention by outside powers in the affairs of a sovereign country is to open a Pandora's box which would be to the advantage of none of those most closely concerned.<sup>398</sup>

The Heath administration, it would seem, keenly sought to pre-empt any attempt at pressuring the government to intervene (multilaterally or otherwise) in the crisis. During discussions on the subject, they never defined the term 'intervention', commonly associated as it is with the use of force. Yet it can be assumed that the government referred not only to intervention by military means, but also to intervention by economic, diplomatic and legal means, given that they avoided engaging in these as well. Of course, it is open to question whether some of HMG's actions, particularly the decision to withhold new development aid to Pakistan could be construed as a form of interference, although there is no evidence in internal records that the government perceived of the act in such terms; on the contrary, they were noticeably dismayed when Pakistani officials did just that.

The government's decision to remain neutral and resist calls for potentially invasive action rests, most obviously, upon prevailing Cold War constraints and the state-centred climate of the era—and also upon the practical realities that confronted British officials, both in London and on the subcontinent, as they sought to understand and respond to mass violence in East Pakistan. These topics are addressed in the following subsections.

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<sup>396</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Notes for supplementaries' prepared for the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan. (Appendix Document 11a)

<sup>397</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Notes for supplementaries' prepared for the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan.

<sup>398</sup> FCO 37/888. Draft of the Foreign Secretary's 23 June 1971 Statement to Commons.

### **Cold War climate and constraints**

HMG, amidst the struggle for supremacy between East and West and its threat of Mutually Assured Destruction, was plainly not the only government to dread the ‘Pandora’s box’ of international intervention. ‘No state has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State,’ stated the UN General Assembly unequivocally in 1965.<sup>399</sup> This echoed the original ban on force formulated in the 1945 United Nations Charter: ‘All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state’.<sup>400</sup> By the time Pakistan sent its soldiers to contend with nationalism in its Eastern province in March 1971, non-interference and respect for state sovereignty were categorically affirmed as inviolable foundations of peaceful international relations.<sup>401</sup> Hence, geopolitical divisions notwithstanding, the major powers agreed with Pakistan at the beginning of the crisis that the matter was an internal affair, within its ‘domestic jurisdiction’.<sup>402</sup>

The consensus was short-lived; East-West tensions at the Security Council swiftly materialised after the millions of refugees poured over the border into India effectively internationalising the conflict. The United States tilted towards Pakistan, a potential intermediary to China and an ally against the Soviet Union. In contrast, the Soviet Union sided with India, as the British Defence Ministry reflected, ‘in support of its political aim of gaining influence among the non-aligned countries at the expense of Western interests’.<sup>403</sup> Britain, as described earlier, considered possible avenues for UN

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<sup>399</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 2131, ‘Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of their Independence and Sovereignty’, 21 December 1965, para. 1.

<sup>400</sup> UN Charter, Chapter I, Article 2(4).

<sup>401</sup> For discussion, see J.L. Holzgrefe, ‘The Humanitarian Intervention Debate’, in *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal, and Political Dilemmas*, eds. J.L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15-52.

<sup>402</sup> U Thant apparently acknowledged this explicitly in letters to Yahya Khan in April 1971 (Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 58).

<sup>403</sup> UKNA: CAB 129/155. Draft ‘Statement on the Defence Estimates 1971: Note by the Secretary of State for Defence’, Ministry of Defence, 26 January 1971.

mediation, but did not pursue any of them, aware that such initiatives would probably incur the ire of one bloc or the other, and be disposed of by veto.

Edward Heath, it turns out, was frustrated by Britain's inability to reduce tension on the subcontinent. He blamed President Nixon for intransigently backing Pakistan at a time when, the Prime Minister believed, the West needed to retain influence over non-aligned India. As a result, the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war 'caused a considerable cooling in Anglo-American relations'.<sup>404</sup> This cooling, according to Heath himself, began when the USSR and India signed a 'Friendship Treaty' in August 1971, to the surprise of the international community. The Americans interpreted the pact as overt provocation from India and believed the Soviets were 'stirring up trouble' on the subcontinent.<sup>405</sup> Britain's assessment, to the contrary, was that India had signed a 'treaty of convenience' to counter-balance relations developing between Pakistan and China—it was not a step towards the USSR, but a basic defence strategy which could have been tempered by warmth from the West.<sup>406</sup>

As Heath's biographer, John Campbell explains, 'Heath had established a good relationship with Mrs. Gandhi, sympathised with India's support for Bengal and hoped to play a mediating role. To his annoyance Nixon and Kissinger—regarding India as a Soviet puppet and just at that moment preparing to reopen relations with Pakistan's protector, China—branded India the aggressor and vigorously supported Pakistan'.<sup>407</sup> Yet, however much the Prime Minister was 'bitter' about the barriers to mediation and Nixon's 'bungling' of the affair, his administration never attempted to alter American policy;<sup>408</sup> nor did it seek to organize a joint overture to India from the West, as Heath would have liked, to counter Soviet friendliness. Fenced in by the political paralysis of

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<sup>404</sup> D. R. Thorpe, *Alec Douglas-Home* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), 430.

<sup>405</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 486.

<sup>406</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 486.

<sup>407</sup> John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 344; Andrew Roth offers a similar account in *Heath and the Heathmen* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 227.

<sup>408</sup> Roth *Heathmen*, 227.

the era which had reduced 'Britain to a kind of no-man's land between the two opposing super-Powers',<sup>410</sup> the government instead sought to maintain an equidistant position between India-USSR and Pakistan-USA by advocating the 'most uncontroversial action'<sup>411</sup> throughout most of the crisis, and eventually tilting towards India, refraining from voting expressly against the latter's military intervention in contrast to the majority of the Security Council.

Heath, in his autobiography, recalls discussing the affair with Nixon and Kissinger in late December 1971, following the conclusion of hostilities:

Nixon: Well, Henry, we had our differences of opinion over the Indo-Pakistan War. Will you explain to Ted why we pursued the policy we did?

Kissinger: In that war, Pakistan was supported by China, and India by the Soviet Union. Pakistan was weaker than India, and China weaker than the Soviet Union. You had the two weaker countries lined up against the two stronger ones. We supported the two weaker nations so as to restore the balance and prevent them being overwhelmed, which would have been against our own interests. That, if I may so...has been British policy throughout the ages.

Heath: Henry...is of course historically correct, with one exception. We never supported the weaker partners if we thought that all three of us would lose. This is what would have happened in this last Indo-Pakistan War.<sup>412</sup>

This exchange, while confirming the division of powers and related Anglo-American tensions, is primarily interesting in that it is representative of how senior British officials and their biographers tended to recall the crisis—that is, in terms of geopolitical alliances and how subcontinental war may have affected those alliances. There is no reference to Pakistan's military repression of political opponents in, for example, D.R. Thorpe's biography of *Alec Douglas-Home* (1996), the memoirs of former Defence Secretary, Peter Carrington, and those of Heath's Political Secretary, Douglas Hurd, nor even in the work of well-known parliamentary biographer, Andrew Roth, *Heath and the Heathmen* (1972), published while the administration was still in

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<sup>410</sup> Northedge *Descent from Power*, 358.

<sup>411</sup> CAB 148/116. 'Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs', 27 July 1971.

<sup>412</sup> Quoted in Heath *Autobiography*, 486.

office.<sup>413</sup> The tendency to emphasise the Indo-Pakistani conflict over the violence that preceded it, well expresses the climate of the era, when foreign affairs were widely viewed within the prism of East-West geopolitics, and relations between state actors ranked among the most memorable events.

Edward Heath, in fact, is the only senior British official to refer to the original incident that eventually lead to international war in 1971—the Pakistani government’s crackdown on its eastern wing. He recalled that:

The trouble started in March after the Pakistani army had acted to quell disorder in what was then the Province of East Pakistan. As a result, an estimated 10 million people left the province for the Indian state of West Bengal, creating enormous problems for the Indian government....Given the links between Britain and the sub-continent, it was inevitable that strong feelings were aroused in this country. There was never any question, however, of outside interference in the internal affairs of an independent Commonwealth country.<sup>414</sup>

Heath’s reference to the repression, while unusual amongst his peers, is vague; the emphasis plainly rests on the British policy of non-interference, a policy the government adopted and maintained from the outset. Accordingly, Cabinet began to discuss events on the subcontinent at length only when international war appeared imminent, after which officials began urgently assessing how Britain could defuse the situation with other Security Council members. In contrast, Cabinet rarely deliberated state terror in East Pakistan, in terms of UN intervention, geopolitical alliances, or otherwise. Foreign Office assessments of Britain’s policy options regarding the East Pakistan crisis, meanwhile, tended to focus on diplomatic and aid-related courses of action. Intervention was mentioned repeatedly—in terms of what Britain would not do. There was indeed ‘never any question...of outside interference’.<sup>415</sup>

For some analysts today, the Security Council’s failure to react to Pakistan’s oppressive campaign, and its reluctance to support India’s military intervention, points

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<sup>413</sup> D. R. Thorpe, *Alec Douglas-Home* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996); Peter Carrington, *Reflect on Things Past: The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (London: William Collins, 1988); Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 2003); Andrew Roth, *Heath and the Heathmen* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

<sup>414</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 485.

<sup>415</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 485.

to the ‘moral bankruptcy of cold-war international society’<sup>416</sup> and the unethical exclusion of human rights from foreign affairs.<sup>417</sup> Such criticism, however, appears somewhat anachronistic. ‘Human rights wasn’t a guiding light of British foreign policy, or any country’s foreign policy at the time,’ underscores Nicholas Barrington, a veteran diplomat in Pakistan who, in 1971, worked in Heath’s Foreign Office.<sup>418</sup> Britain’s concern at the time was international peace and stability—‘We are a trading country. Britain’s interest is always in peace to preserve trade’.<sup>419</sup> Douglas Hurd, referring to his later role as Foreign Secretary during the Bosnian civil war (1992-1995) which witnessed NATO involvement, concurs: ‘Intervention on behalf of human rights is now very well-mentioned. Before the mid-1990s, it simply wasn’t an issue’.<sup>421</sup>

True as this may be, it is worth noting that India justified its recourse to force at the Security Council in 1971, precisely in terms of a human rights rescue operation. The ‘complete domination, complete subjugation, and complete military butchery’ of East Pakistanis by their own government, declared Shri Sen, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, constituted acts that ‘shock the conscience of mankind’ and contravened international conventions on genocide, human rights and self-determination.<sup>422</sup> What is more, he continued, India’s numerous pleas to the international community throughout the conflict to stop the ‘human tragedy’ had received no response.<sup>423</sup> Hence, proclaimed Sen, ‘We are glad that we have on this particular occasion absolutely nothing but the purest of motives and the purest of intentions: to rescue the people of East Bengal from what they are suffering. If that is a

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<sup>416</sup> Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 52.

<sup>417</sup> Pilkington ‘Canada and the East Pakistan crisis’, 452, 469.

<sup>418</sup> Nicholas John Barrington (Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1968 - 1971), Telephone Interview by author, 28 September 2009.

<sup>419</sup> Nicholas Barrington, Telephone Interview by author, 28 September 2009.

<sup>421</sup> Douglas Hurd, ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation with David Reynolds’, seminar at the *Britain and the Cold War: 23<sup>rd</sup> Summer Conference of the Centre for Contemporary British History*, Institute of Historical Research, London UK, 22 June 2009.

<sup>422</sup> 4 December 1971, *Bangla Desh and Indo-Pak War: India Speaks at the U.N.* (India: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1972), 74, 71, 81.

<sup>423</sup> 7 December 1971, Sen quoting from his letter of 30 March 1971 to the UN Secretary General in *India Speaks*, 118.

crime, the Security Council can judge for itself'.<sup>424</sup> India's comments provide a thought-provoking example of how a government openly espoused the rhetoric of human rights and international humanitarian norms during the Cold War, although what its precise motivations for doing so were, remain a matter of debate.

For authentic as India's humanitarian concerns may have been, it is without doubt that the Gandhi administration also had various 'off-the-board'<sup>425</sup> interests for resorting to war. Of these, domestic electoral politics, West Bengal's commercial trade with East Pakistan and, most obviously, the desire to debilitate its historic rival, Pakistan, were significant.<sup>426</sup> The British Foreign Office, in an internal policy note written months before the war, agreed: 'Indian motives are a mixture of a desire to see Pakistan disrupted and weakened, a genuine humanitarian concern about the loss of life and horror at the flood of 5 million refugees from East Pakistan and the burden they impose'.<sup>427</sup> Hence, international legal scholars Thomas Franck and Nigel Rodley concluded in 1973, while India's 'motive of rescue was probably genuine, so were the self-interested political goals achieved'.<sup>428</sup> As such, the intervention failed to 'pass the "clean hands" test' in the eyes of the global community who feared it would set a dangerous precedent in which a more powerful state, under the guise of humanitarianism, could endanger international stability at will.<sup>429</sup> The Nixon administration, represented by its Ambassador to the UN, George H. Bush, conceded that while events in East Pakistan were "tragic", this did not "justify the actions of India in intervening militarily and placing in jeopardy the territorial integrity and political

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<sup>424</sup> 4 December 1971, *India Speaks*, 80.

<sup>425</sup> Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 62.

<sup>426</sup> Wheeler discusses these motivations in *Saving Strangers*, 56, 62.

<sup>427</sup> 'India: Background Note on Internal Politics and Foreign Affairs', June 1971, Restricted Briefing, FCO—British Parliamentary Delegation (source: Jessel Personal Papers).

<sup>428</sup> Thomas M. Franck and Nigel S. Rodley, 'After Bangladesh: The Law of Humanitarian Intervention by Military Force', *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 67 (1973): 286.

<sup>429</sup> Thomas M. Franck, 'Interpretation and Change in the Law of Humanitarian Intervention,' in *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal, and Political Dilemmas*, 217.



independence of its neighbour Pakistan”.<sup>430</sup> Most members of the Security Council concurred in principle, and apart from the Soviet Union, either clamoured for an immediate cease-fire, or like Britain, abstained from expressing an opinion.

Peter Smith, a former diplomat at the High Commission in Islamabad, reflecting on these events, sympathises with the international community’s reactions. ‘I’m temperamentally entirely in favour of not speaking out, because I regard these things as an internal affair....What good does it do, for us or anybody else, to go charging in? These are internal affairs...and they [the country in question] must fix it. The only sanction you should take is to withhold help, trade, prayers, whatever you like. But *don’t* intervene. I’m sure the world would be much better if we didn’t’.<sup>431</sup> ‘....It was technically an internal affair of Pakistan. In those days, that factor was even more limiting than it is now, rightly or wrongly’.<sup>432</sup> In any event, ‘what could you do? We tried to do something at Suez and Iraq....And in both cases, it’s been wrong, which has merely strengthened me in my innate, idle, but totally genuine belief that, almost always, things are best left alone....You don’t know, so you’d better not act, unless you absolutely have to’.<sup>433</sup>

These views, however personal, reflect to some degree the mindset of a generation. Political leaders opposed intervention ‘directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever’<sup>434</sup> on the grounds that it threatened the notably fragile international order of the era. For them, commitment to the norm of state sovereignty and the non-use of force was therefore not necessarily a cold or ‘bankrupt’ concept; it could also be viewed as a commitment to the bedrock of cultural self-determination and peaceful co-existence ‘in an age when the human race...was threatened by extinction at its own hand’.<sup>435</sup> For

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<sup>430</sup> Security Council 1611th Meeting, 12 December 1971, as quoted in Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 69.

<sup>431</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>432</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>433</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>434</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 2131, 21 December 1965.

<sup>435</sup> Northedge *Descent from Power*, 361.

Britain, the constraints upon its international relations imposed by this forbidding strategic climate, inevitably strengthened the government's resolve to remain on the periphery of the Pakistan crisis and seek to exert influence from afar.

## Diplomats in the fog of war

*'In the present fog of war and atrocity, one thing stands out all too clearly. It is that Yahya Khan's terrible mistake, and its terrible consequences, have created a new area of instability in Asia and the world'.*

—Editorial, *The Sunday Times*, 13 June 1971<sup>436</sup>

Notwithstanding the Cold War constraints on British foreign policy, civil servants who served under Heath agree that the Conservative government sought to obtain a detailed image of violence on the subcontinent in 1971. Understanding conflicts beyond Europe's borders, whatever the government's priorities, remained a matter of standard intelligence procedure aimed at protecting British national interests. The style of crisis reporting emerging from the High Commissions in Pakistan was therefore customarily thorough. 'In a civil war situation...the way we were reporting was normal practice,' confirms Arthur Collins formerly of the Deputy High Commission in Dacca.<sup>437</sup> 'It's part of the job of any high commission or embassy to keep London fully informed. London has to know, London has to talk to people, and people expect the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be well-informed on what's going on in the world, so it's our job, in the field, to inform them'.<sup>438</sup>

Notwithstanding their efforts, officials explain that intelligence gathering and assessment during the conflict was complex and, inevitably, limited by the 'fog of war' common to military situations. As Clausewitz reflected in his monumental *On War* (1832):

The great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance. What this feeble light leaves indistinct to the sight, talent must discover, or must be left to chance. It is therefore again talent, or the favour of fortune, on which reliance must be placed, for want of objective knowledge.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Editorial, *The Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 1971. (Appendix Document 8)

<sup>437</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>438</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>439</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (On War) (Berlin: Dümmlers Verlag, 1832; trans., J.J. Graham, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., 1918), Book II, chapter II. 24.

This section, which comprises my interviews with British civil servants of the era serving in Islamabad, Dacca and London, illustrates the precise difficulties imposed by the Pakistan crisis that rendered intelligence gathering and assessment problematic for the British. These difficulties and various practical aspects of the diplomatic service reinforced the Heath administration's inherent preference for neutrality and non-interference.

***Diplomats in Pakistan: a question of neutrality***

British diplomats, regardless of the country to which they are posted, are instructed to protect and promote British interests, report objectively on local events, and provide London with dispassionate regional assessments and policy advice.<sup>440</sup> Total impartiality, however, is impossible; diplomats, to some degree, generally assume a 'country angle'.<sup>441</sup> 'You can't *but* be influenced,' Peter Smith formerly of the Islamabad High Commission recalls, '....at least I can't, by what people tell you, and talk in the papers and that sort of thing. Neutrality, in my opinion, is best measured in relative terms'.<sup>442</sup> In the case of Pakistan in 1971, of course, there was no single country angle, but two, often conflicting, provincial angles. Officials in Dacca reported the Pakistani army's 'kill and burn' campaign in the province, while those in Islamabad frequently cast the military action as quashing a 'rebellion' or conducting a 'counterinsurgency'.

Many foreign diplomats in East Pakistan, not only the British, viewed the crisis differently from their counterparts in West Pakistan over a thousand miles away. Certainly, this was the case with staff at the American Consulate in Dacca, with whom the British Deputy High Commission occasionally conferred. While the precise content

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<sup>440</sup> Cyril Pickard describes these duties with reference to the influential *Plowden Committee Report on Representational Service Overseas* (HMSO, 1964), in 'Foreign Policy and the Diplomat', 1 February 1977.

<sup>441</sup> Nicholas Barrington, Telephone Interview by author, 28 September 2009.

<sup>442</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

of their exchanges rarely appears in British government records, when it does, it reflects a friendly working relationship between American and British representatives in Pakistan, rather than sensitive diplomatic discourse aimed at influencing each other's respective government policies. When, however, the American Consul General Archer Blood, appeared to be taking a provocative position on the conflict, British representatives did not hesitate to convey to London that: '[Blood has] consistently maintained that the Army has overstepped the mark. His opinions have been in direct conflict with those of the Ambassador in Islamabad....[His] views are also shared to a large extent by seasoned diplomats [in East Pakistan] and to some extent by their Home Offices, if not by their opposite numbers in Islamabad'.<sup>443</sup> Staff at the American Consulate, it turns out (although this was not recorded in British files), took the exceptional step of cabling Washington directly to protest their government's slant towards Pakistan and refusal to intervene "even morally" in a conflict "in which unfortunately the overworked term genocide is applicable".<sup>444</sup>

Following these acts of dissent, Archer Blood was recalled. Interestingly, in his 2002 memoirs, Blood claims that he was not alone:

I left Dacca on June 5....My comrade in arms, Frank Sargeant, the British Deputy High Commissioner, departed the same day, and for basically the same reason. Sargeant's superior, Sir Cyril Pickard, had told me that Sargeant was being removed because of his 'emotional and rumor-laden reporting'. That same charge had probably been levied at me, but I always found Frank a model of those validly attributed signs of British character—coolness and steadiness under fire. I was proud and grateful to have had him as a colleague in those trying days.<sup>445</sup>

To be sure, Frank Sargeant left the post of Deputy High Commissioner to East Pakistan soon after mass violence in the region broke out. However, according to British records, Sargeant was recalled due to ill health. That, at any rate, is what the Foreign Secretary and Minister of Defence told MPs a few months into the violence when asked

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<sup>443</sup> FCO 37/888. Cover Letter enclosing 28 May 1971 Confederation of British Industry Report, Dacca—SAD, 14 June 1971.

<sup>444</sup> Cable 'Dissent from U.S. Policy Toward East Pakistan', American Consulate General Dacca—Washington, April 6 1971, quoted in Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 244-245. Blood's earlier cable 'Selective Genocide', sent on 27 March 1971, was equally inflammatory (see *The Cruel Birth*, 213-214).

<sup>445</sup> Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 323.

to 'explain why, at this stage, it is apparently proposed to withdraw Her Majesty's representative in Dacca';<sup>446</sup> 'many of us are very concerned....[and] would be grateful if...there could be confirmation of the fact that in no way has there been pressure from the Pakistan Government for the withdrawal of Mr. Sargeant'.<sup>447</sup> 'He is being withdrawn,' responded the Foreign Secretary, 'because he has been under severe strain and must have a short rest'.<sup>448</sup> Minister of Defence, Lord Balniel, concurred: 'Mr. Sargeant had returned home because of illness through pressure of work, and...was being replaced immediately'.<sup>449</sup>

Britain's Deputy High Commissioner did not condemn the Pakistani army and protest his government's non-interventionist stance in as direct a manner as that of his American counterpart. Nevertheless, a few of his telegrams implicitly did just that:

We know...that the Army is acting in unrestrained fashion, wantonly killing and destroying, and generally comporting itself like an Army of conquest. Its policy, in so far as one can be determined, is the systematic elimination of prominent Bengali politicians and intellectuals....Student leaders and their teachers have also been singled out as being in urgent need of destruction....Those arrested 'disappear'; there is no indication that any trials are planned....And each day of killing, of non-Bengalis by Bengalis, of Bengalis by non-Bengalis, merely stores up a darker future of more atrocities. From these the British community cannot for ever expect to remain immune, if its Government overtly supports a Government of Pakistan ready to pursue in Bengal the policies it is today.<sup>450</sup>

The Deputy High Commissioner's reference to the British government 'overtly' supporting Pakistan is exaggerated; yet it is to be remembered that he was writing at the beginning of the campaign, when state leaders had publicly agreed that the crisis was Pakistan's domestic affair—a sentiment he clearly did not share. Sargeant, on occasion also used inflammatory terms to describe the military campaign in East Pakistan. After suspending the activities of the British Council in Dacca, for example, he explained his

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<sup>446</sup> FCO 37/889. Labour MP Michael Stuart, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 867, 9 June 1971.

<sup>447</sup> FCO 37/889. Labour MP Tam Dalyell, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 884, 8 June 1971.

<sup>448</sup> FCO 37/889. Alec Douglas-Home, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 868, 8 June 1971.

<sup>449</sup> FCO 37/889. Lord Balniel (Robert Alexander Lindsay), Minister of Defence's Statement to Commons, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, col. 884, 8 June 1971.

<sup>450</sup> FCO 37/883. Report, Dacca—SAD and FCO, 14 April 1971. (Appendix Documents 22a and 22 b)

decision to London in the following terms: ‘since it is our function to cultivate and identify with local academics, educationists and intellectuals, IE those who are apparently suffering pogrom regardless of political affiliations...the Council can no longer operate in a territory in which its leading contacts are being shot down’.<sup>451</sup> The Deputy High Commissioner’s choice of ‘pogrom’—originally a reference to violent attacks on Jewish minorities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Empire—to describe the Pakistani army’s campaign is clearly provocative; it suggests the risk of moral complicity in what may be a clear violation of international humanitarian norms.

However, telegrams with this blatantly critical tone are rare. Most British diplomats in Pakistan did not explicitly protest Britain’s policy, nor did they categorically condemn Pakistan’s military campaign. Disapproval of the latter was normally tempered by references to violence committed by other parties (as, in fact, is the case with most of Sargeant’s messages). All the same, officials at London’s Foreign Office, responsible for reading and interpreting reports from the region, soon expressed the ‘feel[ing] that our H/C reporting has at times been less than “objective”’.<sup>452</sup> What is more, former South Asia Department officers today can remember sensing that diplomats on the subcontinent were becoming ‘partisan’, ‘too involved’, or ‘not dispassionate’.<sup>453</sup> They confirm that the neutrality of Britain’s Deputy High Commissioner may very well have been in question—‘We *were* getting very gory reports from Dacca’.<sup>454</sup> Moreover, it was standard practice to replace diplomats who had intimate knowledge of the region with those who ‘had no previous experience of the subcontinent, and therefore no prejudice’.<sup>455</sup> ‘It’s the nature of diplomacy,’ John Birch, then head of the India desk, remarks. ‘London wants balanced and objective

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<sup>451</sup> FCO 37/879. Telegram 184, Dacca—FCO, 29 March 1971.

<sup>452</sup> FCO 37/885. Report ‘Situation in EastPak’ (handwritten annotation), SAD—FCO (internal circulation), 13 April 1971.

<sup>453</sup> John Birch (FCO South Asia Department, India Desk, 1971 - 1972), Personal Interview by author, 23 September 2009, London UK; Richard Fell (FCO South Asia Department, Pakistan Desk, 1971 - 1972), Personal Interview by author, 16 July 2009, London UK.

<sup>454</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

<sup>455</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009; Richard Fell, Interview by author, 16 July 2009.

reporting. There is a difference between reporting and commentating or passing judgement'.<sup>456</sup>

Peter Smith agrees that a concern for neutrality may also have factored in to the change of leadership at Britain's High Commission in Islamabad.<sup>457</sup> Lawrence Pumphrey, the replacement High Commissioner, arrived in June 1971. According to Smith, he differed significantly from his predecessor, Cyril Pickard. Pickard had served in India before assuming the post of High Commissioner to Pakistan, and consequently had considerable knowledge of the region and its leaders. Indeed, as recounted, he expressed his disapproval of the 'massive reprisals' and the 'state of complete lawlessness' in East Pakistan, towards the end of his tour, in person to the country's most senior authorities.<sup>458</sup> While this airing of opinion may have been somewhat routine of diplomatic leave-taking, Smith recalls that London plainly welcomed that the replacement High Commissioner was not likely to engage in such blunt diplomacy. For the latter, he states, arriving in Pakistan was like 'a journey by a blind man into fog'.<sup>459</sup> 'He had absolutely no knowledge of Asia at all. He came in with a total ignorance which is typically Foreign Office....I don't believe our government gave him any brief before going—he wasn't told to do this or that'.<sup>460</sup> Interestingly, Smith does not recall the new High Commissioner and Pickard ever speaking about the East Pakistan crisis in any depth during the handover. 'They didn't talk much really, and when they did, it was mainly about administrative stuff—"is your head-bearer reliable?"—and that sort of thing. I suspect they shouldn't have agreed on many things...they weren't on the same wavelength at all, Cyril and he, it was quite clear'.<sup>461</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

<sup>457</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>458</sup> FCO 37/887. Secret Telegram 905 'My Tel No 421 from Dacca to FCO: East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 21 May 1971; FCO 37/886. Telegram 421 'High Commissioner: East Pakistan' Dacca—FCO, 19 May 1971.

<sup>459</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

<sup>460</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>461</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.



British diplomats in Pakistan 1971 were expected to remain neutral when mass violence against civilians was committed by leaders of the country to which they were posted—state terror in the context of civil war was strictly an internal affair. To describe such terror with disapproval was to risk being labelled “emotional”,<sup>462</sup> and therefore, unfit; to directly protest the non-interventionist stance of the British government was, for the most part, unacceptable. Indeed, as former officials recall, there was no system in place to express internal dissent with regards to foreign policy, and there was always the risk of damaging one’s reputation by protesting one’s ‘masters’ too stridently.<sup>463</sup> Even today, acknowledges one official, regardless of how uncomfortable diplomats might feel about a given policy, ‘most people just go with the flow’ and seek to at least appear neutral.<sup>464</sup>

### ***Dacca: the British Deputy High Commission***

Frank Sargeant was not replaced until September 1971; the post of Deputy High Commissioner in East Pakistan, amidst state terror, civil war and communal violence, remained vacant for nearly four months. Arthur Collins, the Commission’s Political Secretary, on his first overseas posting, became acting Deputy High Commissioner in the interim. The following section is based on excerpts from personal interviews with him.<sup>465</sup>

### ***The provincial angle***

Collins confirms that British officials in East and West Pakistan did not always agree on matters related to the crisis. ‘We had somewhat different perceptions than the High

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<sup>462</sup> Quoted in Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 323. In a comparable case, Pilkington describes how this term may have been applied by the Canadian government to its representative in New Delhi in ‘Canada and the East Pakistan crisis’, 458-459.

<sup>463</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>464</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>465</sup> Arthur Collins (Acting Deputy High Commissioner Dacca, June - September 1971; First Secretary Political, 1970 - 1972), Personal Interviews by author, 18 and 30 June 2009, London and Brighton UK, tape recordings.

Commission in Islamabad. Normally, you have an embassy or high commission in a country which has consulates scattered around which do commercial work, look after interests of nationals, and so forth; they do a little reporting, but they're not really politically active. In our case it was different. Because East Pakistan was so very different in nature than West Pakistan, because it was 1500 miles away, because communications in those days were not like today at all...because there was that physical, and cultural, and political gap, we in Dacca, were regarded as a semi-independent post. We acknowledged the High Commissioner in Islamabad as our nominal head, and copied everything that we sent of any significance to Islamabad, but we reported directly to London. That's not the activity of a consulate, which reports to its embassy'.<sup>466</sup>

According to Collins, Islamabad's direct sources of information on East Pakistan were severely limited. Instead, the High Commissioner relied on officials who had extensive regional knowledge of the Western wing, but whose contacts in the East consisted mainly of central government sympathisers. Officials in Islamabad, moreover, rarely visited East Pakistan during the crisis. 'I don't think they got particularly good insights into the situation in the East. It did not compare with the kind of reporting that we were able to do'.<sup>467</sup>

#### *Priority: nationals*

Collins remembers that when mass violence appeared imminent in East Pakistan, the Deputy High Commission's main objective was not to defuse regional tension, but to protect British nationals: 'I went to Dacca in 1970. That was a year in which political tension was building steadily. One of the first things I did was tour the country. Under the cover of that tour, I made careful contact with all the British citizens who we

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<sup>466</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>467</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

regarded as our semi-official correspondents. They were people like tea planters, bank managers or shipping agents—people who had good contacts, and knew both the local people and the British living there. Normally, they kept lists of all the British citizens in their area, and had short-wave radios, so they could get in touch with the High Commission. They were going to be responsible for running an evacuation locally, if the people in the area had to get out of the country quickly. That was the kind of thing *we* had to give our attention to’.<sup>468</sup>

‘We took quite a number of steps in readiness for the possibility that violence would break out. The big event, of course, was the elections’.<sup>469</sup> After Khan suspended the National Assembly at the beginning of March 1971, tension grew considerably. ‘The Bengalis had a form of strike—*hartals*—which were rather frightening. Everything shut down, anyone who moved on the streets was likely to have a brick thrown at them. When Yahya Khan made the announcement, the Bengalis all rushed out into the streets, armed with long staves and sticks, running here and there, knocking things over....It was an unsafe situation. One could see that there was a position of great confrontation’.<sup>470</sup>

‘....We did not know when the crackdown might come. We did anticipate that at some point there might well be a military crackdown, because of the extreme political tension, and the strikes, and the general disturbances that were taking place. But we had a responsibility for the safety of British citizens if there was a general breakdown in law and order. It was more *that* that we had to fear than any kind of structured conflict’.<sup>471</sup>

Indeed, as is evident from government records, diplomats in both wings of the country—whatever their private assessments of the military campaign—strove to maintain good relations with Pakistani authorities largely in order to protect British

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<sup>468</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>469</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>470</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>471</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

nationals, and they entreated London to do the same. 'Please alert Ministers to the probable grave consequences for the British communities here if any official criticism of the conduct of the Pakistani Government is voiced at this time,' cabled Frank Sargeant at the beginning of the crisis. '...[This] will enrage the Army which is in control here and with which we must maintain best possible relations'.<sup>472</sup>

In particular, it was feared that the BBC's critical coverage of events might expose Britons to mob violence.<sup>473</sup> Officials thus distanced themselves from the broadcasting agency and requested London to announce that, 'HMG have no control over the content or tone of BBC broadcasts' and 'have no axe to grind whatever as regards Pakistan's internal affairs. They have watched recent developments with sympathy and concern. It is because of the close interest in Pakistan of the British people fostered by the presence in Britain of 200,000 Pakistanis that the British news media are giving events wide coverage'.<sup>474</sup>

Clandestinely, however, representatives continued to report the violence, search for British nationals scattered throughout the province and work on an evacuation plan, which they concealed from Pakistani authorities lest it invoke their ire. Protecting nationals was a priority that, under the circumstances, was as sensitive and time-consuming as it was vital.

### *Multiple responsibilities*

British officials in Dacca, in addition to protecting nationals, had multiple responsibilities: they were obliged to represent Britain to local authorities, report regularly on the political crisis to London, provide situation assessments, protect Britain's commercial interests and oversee immigration services.

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<sup>472</sup> FCO 37/879. Telegram 163, Dacca—FCO, 29 March 1971.

<sup>473</sup> See, for example, FCO 37/879. Telegram 403 'British Subjects in East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 27 March 1971 and Telegram 406 'East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 27 March 1971.

<sup>474</sup> FCO 37/879. Telegram 407 'East Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 27 March 1971.

‘You have to understand, our minds are not solely focused on what *might* happen,’ states Collins. ‘We had daily preoccupations, people from all over coming in and out, seeing us about this that and the other’.<sup>475</sup> What is more, by the middle of 1971, the prospect of mass famine loomed threatening the lives of millions. ‘The whole world was concerned with sending aid, and the UK had particular concern,’ recalls Collins who was requested by the Foreign Office to assess the province’s food supply.<sup>476</sup> ‘It’s all very well to get food into the country, but what do you do with it once you’ve got it there? Unless you’ve got the trucks to move it around (which East Pakistan did not), you can’t do much with however much food you’ve got. This is the kind of practical thing that diplomats have to spend a lot of time doing. And, it takes a lot of work—going to see people, getting facts, drawing your own conclusions, and testing them out’.<sup>477</sup>

‘I was kept busy from morning until night, and so were the other few who were still there. We were under a lot of pressure, dealing on a hand to mouth basis with all kinds of situations, day to day’.<sup>478</sup> ‘It was a very intense period. All one could do was work day and night’.<sup>479</sup>

### *Coping amidst chaos*

Collins was away from Pakistan on leave when military operations in the East began on 25 March 1971. He returned—upon being informed by the Foreign Office that his Deputy High Commissioner, Frank Sargeant, was ill—and, as the crisis deepened, carefully went over plans to evacuate the approximately 1000 British nationals living in the province. Major evacuations took place in April, followed by a further dramatic set from both wings in December.

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<sup>475</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>476</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>477</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>478</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>479</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

John Graham, former Principle Private Secretary to Douglas-Home, keenly recalls the efforts made by regional representatives during the December evacuations from East Pakistan. ‘I...remember a rather remarkable effort by the Royal Air Force and the local expatriate community. It had been decided to evacuate foreigners and we were to send in a C130 to lift them out. However the airfield had been bombed. Men of the local foreign community went out early in the morning to fill some of the bomb craters. The C130 landed successfully on the still rather short runway and loaded more than 100 men, women and children, including members of other countries’ diplomatic staffs. The pilot held the overloaded aircraft at the end of the runway, revved up the engines to the maximum, released the brakes and got it off. I remember a letter of congratulations and thanks from the Russians, and I think some others, for what we thought at the time was rather a splendid feat of initiative and skill’.<sup>480</sup>

According to Collins, the difficulties of organizing such complicated evacuations and carrying out his other duties at the same time were substantial; all the more so, given the chaotic conditions which reigned in East Pakistan, with its damaged roads, random violence, and later, Indian air raids that left unexploded bombs strewn about the province.<sup>481</sup> Officials, not surprisingly, also worried for their own safety. Collins, working late at night in the Deputy Commission offices, was shot at (by whom he does not know), presumably because it was after curfew and he had forgotten to turn out the light. ‘That was the kind of thing one had to live with as a possibility,’ he exclaims. ‘....It was a bizarre somewhat crazy scenario, in which there was a degree of normality against a backdrop of *fundamental* instability’.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> John Noble Graham, Letter to author, 5 July 2009.

<sup>481</sup> Arthur Collins, Interviews by author, 18 and 30 June 2009.

<sup>482</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

*Impediments to intelligence gathering and assessment*

Collins is satisfied with the quality of the Deputy High Commission's reporting in 1971. However, he explains, a number of obstacles complicated their task. Firstly, they had limited sources of information—just a few foreign nationals and East Bengalis 'in the know'; 'There was an active Bengali press, much of it in the local language, and we did have useful local people reading the press. We also had contacts with a small number of highly intelligent East Pakistani middle-class engaged in the media. These people had their fingers on the pulse. But to get *really* reliable information on which you could base a careful assessment to London of what was going to happen was really quite difficult'.<sup>483</sup> '[T]here wasn't *any* information coming out of official sources. Martial law had been introduced—there was a complete crackdown on information, and the press was not operating'.<sup>484</sup> 'It was amazingly difficult for us to get reliable information'.<sup>485</sup>

Secondly, officials had limited mobility. 'There was a curfew so it was very dangerous to move around. But we had to be able to communicate with each other, so there were times when one had to risk going out after curfew, but you had to be very careful, because the Pakistan Army had patrols and had set up road blocks, and the Bengali guerrillas were moving around with weapons, so it was a question of who shot first basically'.<sup>486</sup>

East Pakistan's marshy topography and poor infrastructure further complicated the situation. Collins vividly recalls how '[w]e couldn't get out to the great mass of the country—the flat, watery, network of thousands and thousands of simple little villages—which was exposed to military punitive action. There were no means of access. It was extremely hard to get around, there were few vehicles, petrol, and the

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<sup>483</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>484</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>485</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>486</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

roads were in a terrible state—they were being blown up by the guerrilla forces, and there were Pakistani soldiers everywhere. We could sometimes see smoke rising, even from Dacca, and you could ask someone what they thought was going on, but one always had to be careful about whether they *really* knew, or whether they were just telling us they did'.<sup>487</sup>

As it was, British officials rarely witnessed extreme violence, and instead relied on second-hand accounts. Referring to two telegrams he sent detailing a 'policy of extermination of Hindus' and 'indiscriminate killing...still in progress',<sup>488</sup> Collins states: 'These were good factual reports, based on very reliable informants. The church's information was always given in very good faith, and they gave it to the best of their ability. But, they were dependent on information from their own sources. They didn't necessarily witness it themselves. I don't recall any of the clergy saying to me, "*I've seen—I've seen men with bayonets in their backs*". But of course, it *was* happening. It was going on, just largely out of sight'.<sup>489</sup>

'I remember our Defence Attaché in Islamabad came over once, and while I was driving him round at night near the Army cantonment, he said "that's a strange smell of burning. Those are human bodies burning. I recognize the smell of human flesh burning, it's a very distinctive smell". He was convinced. And, it wasn't for me to question it'.<sup>490</sup>

'We also got many reports concerning Hindus being taken off buses....It was repeatedly reported to me that, sometimes, buses were stopped, and all the men were

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<sup>487</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>488</sup> FCO 37/887. Telegram 379 'Conditions in East Pakistan', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 14 June 1971; Telegram 390 'Army Operations in E.P.', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 19 June 1971. (Appendix Documents 6 and 7)

<sup>489</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>490</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.



taken off and checked. Those who were not circumcised were shot. Those who were, got back on the bus'.<sup>491</sup>

'Before, when the country was relatively peaceful, there were villages and small towns which were solidly Hindu. My wife and I visited some of these places. All those places were eliminated. Of course, I couldn't get back there and check whether there were any ashes, or not. So, a lot of this reporting was secondary reporting, but it was consistent'.<sup>492</sup>

Overall, Collins maintains, '[t]here was very little blood on the streets. The horrors did not happen in front of us—they happened out of sight'.<sup>493</sup> British officials, hampered by incomplete information and generally confined to their own circumscribed spheres of activity, found it very difficult to assess the acts of violence that were taking place throughout the province. Of course, Collins continues, the Deputy High Commission was not completely removed from the conflict. 'I didn't want to leave you with the impression that I didn't see or know *anything* firsthand. I had contacts in Dacca—middle class people, lawyers, activists, etc—who just disappeared. When I went away on leave, they were there sitting happily at their desks. When I came back, they were not there, and there was no information about them. These people just disappeared. Without doubt, they were killed. The authorities really had it in for them—they were marked men'.<sup>494</sup>

'My driver at the High Commission was a Hindu, and his father was taken in on that first night. So, he [the driver] went to the police headquarters to try to get his father released, saying he worked for the British High Commission. He never got his father released; he never left the police station. So yes, people we knew, people we dealt with, just disappeared. And we couldn't find anything out about them. We kept making

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<sup>491</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>492</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>493</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>494</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

representations to the authorities who took notes, and promised to make enquiries, but no satisfactory information ever came back. I remember the driver's elderly mother came later to the High Commission seeking news about her son. She was a very simple old peasant lady....We just couldn't give her any comfort at all'.<sup>495</sup>

This aspect of the violence that Collins refers to—the alleged targeting of the Bengali middle classes—was one, he recalls, that officials during the crisis had notable difficulty verifying. The news that the Pakistani army had murdered students and professors during the first days of the crackdown in March 1971, for example, appeared somewhat incredible, and more likely to be the product of media misinformation. This impression began to recede only after the Deputy High Commission 'received reports from trustworthy sources that five members academic staff Dacca University and many students have been killed and others wounded. Other reports speak of thirty-five professors dead'.<sup>496</sup>

Weeks later, the number two at Britain's High Commission in Islamabad, Reginald Burrows, met with the Pakistani High Commissioner to the UK [Salman Ali] who persisted in 'quer[ying] whether there had in fact been any killing of teaching staff in Dacca University....He [the Pakistani High Commissioner] said that while the academic world had been much stirred by reports of such killings, those reported killed had turned up one by one still alive'.<sup>497</sup> Following the series of reports from Dacca indicating the contrary, including a list with several of the victim's names, Burrows remarked, 'I realize now that he [the Pakistani High Commissioner] was taking part in a worldwide propaganda exercise. We are pretty sure of our facts and...follow these matters closely and coolly'.<sup>498</sup> Pakistan's official version of events, it is evident, often

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<sup>495</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>496</sup> FCO 37/889. Telegram 184, Dacca—FCO, 29 March 1971.

<sup>497</sup> FCO 37/887. Letter, Islamabad—FCO, 20 May 1971.

<sup>498</sup> FCO 37/887. Letter, Islamabad—FCO, 20 May 1971.

differed dramatically from Britain's regional intelligence. This, as will be discussed, added to the complexities of intelligence gathering during the crisis.

*Conservative death toll*

When informed that many sources, academic and otherwise, have alleged that over a million East Pakistanis died during the conflict, Arthur Collins responds: 'I doubt that it was as many as a million. If you have a million deaths, you have an awful lot of bodies to dispose of. Dead bodies *were* being thrown into rivers, or burned. But I use to move around Dacca at night. It was completely empty. There were roadblocks, but there wasn't obvious killing or fighting going on—there was no small arms fire, let alone machine gun fire. Of course, it was all very unpleasant, but there is a natural tendency to inflate figures. It simply would not have been easy to have a million people dead without more obvious evidence of it'.<sup>499</sup>

'....After all, my own direct experience was spasmodic, and the reports of mass killings which we received were difficult to evaluate, and there is a tendency to exaggerate numbers. I *never* came across evidence of huge funeral pyres or thousands of bodies floating down rivers—you've got to get rid of bodies. If you kill an awful lot of people, it's not really practical to bury them. If you do, they get buried in shallow graves. There was no exhumation of mass shallow graves in Bangladesh'.<sup>500</sup>

Former officials at the South Asia Department agree, adding that estimates approaching one million did not reach the Foreign Office at any point during the crisis; it was only the Indian press, they recall, that occasionally raised such numbers, and given that country's involvement in events, this was immediately presumed to be propaganda.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>500</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>501</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009; Richard Fell, Interview by author, 16 July 2009.

*Historical analogies: the Nigerian Civil War*

Before being posted to East Pakistan, Arthur Collins worked at the West African Desk of the Foreign Office during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). In 1967, the Ibo population in the country's eastern regions sought to secede, declaring independence as the state of Biafra. The federal military government responded with military repression and a rigorous blockade that prevented basic necessities from reaching the East, extending to international humanitarian relief aid distributed by the Red Cross; hundreds upon thousands reportedly died, many from starvation, leading to widespread accusations of genocide.<sup>502</sup>

The British had granted Nigeria independence only a few years earlier, in 1960. Confronted by a secession crisis in the recently independent country, Harold Wilson's administration controversially supplied arms to the Nigerian federal government, effectively assisting to reassert the authority of the state.<sup>503</sup> Britain's motives in this case are generally traced to oil interests,<sup>504</sup> although Wilson himself implied that the British retained a moral responsibility towards a region to which it had only recently granted independence—"it was undoubtedly right to help an ex-colony and fellow Commonwealth country when it faced secession".<sup>505</sup>

Arthur Collins, when asked to comment on his experience of these events in comparison to those of East Pakistan, responded that although the forms of violence may have been comparable, the contexts in which they took place and the reactions each evoked from HMG were notably distinct. He states: 'What was British policy in the Nigerian civil war? It was to maintain the integrity of Nigeria—to prevent the country splitting up. While we had sympathy with the Ibos at the human level, we did not agree

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<sup>502</sup> Karen Smith examines international reactions to the Biafra conflict in *Genocide and the Europeans*, 66-81.

<sup>503</sup> For how diplomats at the British High Commission in Nigeria may have contributed to this policy, see John W. Young, *Twentieth Century Diplomacy: A Case Study of British Practice, 1963-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66-69.

<sup>504</sup> See Yomi Kristilolu, 'Business as Usual: Britain, Oil and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970', paper presented at the *African Economic History Workshop*, London School of Economics, 25 April 2007.

<sup>505</sup> Harold Wilson, as quoted in Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 72.

with independence for Eastern Nigeria.<sup>506</sup> ‘...similar things [as in East Pakistan] were happening there, possibly on a larger scale. There was mass starvation, and there were mass killings. A lot of people certainly died in the Biafran civil war—I’m just more cautious about the war in which I was actually present....In any case, our government was subjected to a great deal of criticism for supporting the “wrong side”....this did not happen with East Pakistan’.<sup>507</sup>

During the 1971 crisis, Foreign Office officials (including Collins) did not make explicit comparisons to Nigeria in internal records. In contrast, parliamentarians from both sides of the floor did so on a number of occasions—the Conservatives, generally as a reminder to the House of the controversies inherent in post-colonial civil wars and also as an endorsement of HMG’s commitment to non-intervention, while Labour evoked Nigeria to demonstrate why the government should take action *short* of unilateral intervention, such as multilateral initiatives through international organizations, or public condemnations of the military campaign. Both political parties, while supporting HMG’s humanitarian relief contributions to East Pakistan, also brought up Nigeria as a reminder to the government of the complexities of distributing aid during a civil war, particularly as regional authorities who were responsible for (and indeed often insisted on) distributing aid were themselves parties to the conflict.<sup>508</sup>

Beyond such statements, however, the two cases did not appear to have been considered analogous; Pakistan did not harbour key material (oil) interests which might require protection by unilateral measures, and Britain’s sense of responsibility towards the region from which it had withdrawn a quarter of a century ago appeared to be much diminished in comparison to that towards Nigeria. Hence, as Richard Wood stated during a debate on East Pakistan:

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<sup>506</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>507</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>508</sup> See, in particular, the 14 May, 8 June and 9 June 1971 House of Commons debates (*Hansard* transcripts in FCO 37/887 and FCO 37/889).

There are many dissimilarities between this conflict and that in Nigeria, but there is one formal and legal similarity which has some importance. It is that in both cases this is a civil war in a Commonwealth country....the problem facing the United Kingdom Government is—how can we do anything useful without simply being subjected to the charge by Pakistan that we are interfering in its internal affairs and possibly finding that anything we do is counter-productive?<sup>509</sup>

Nigeria, in other words, was primarily interpreted as a deterrent to direct involvement—

‘Here is an instance where the Nigerian parallel is of importance.’<sup>510</sup>

Collins agrees that HMG’s experiences with Nigeria may have bolstered its commitment to non-intervention in 1971, seeing as the former created enormous controversy, not only within Britain but around the world—‘we took a bashing in the media’.<sup>511</sup> The memory of such tumult would have been fresh in the minds of those working for the Heath administration during the South Asia crisis, although they did not vocalize the connection. Meanwhile, those parliamentarians who did, reminded the government of the perils of interference, or alternatively, chided it for not being open to the advantages of less robust but arguably more effective measures. Both framings of the Nigerian civil war, openly or implicitly, supported HMG’s core policy of non-involvement in East Pakistan.

### *Responsibility to act: Islamabad and London*

Turning to the issue of whether anyone in the British government was responsible for acting on reports of state atrocities in East Pakistan—reports which Arthur Collins and his colleagues in Dacca had written themselves, Collins responded: ‘Who was responsible? You can see from my telegrams, Whitehall knew about the [Pakistani] Army campaign....I’m sure the High Commissioner in Islamabad would’ve talked matters over, possibly with the head of state. He would have taken—should have taken—any opportunity he had to express concern. Certainly he would have been able

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<sup>509</sup> FCO 37/887. Richard Wood, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 768, 14 May 1971.

<sup>510</sup> FCO 37/887. Richard Wood, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 768, 14 May 1971.

<sup>511</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

to, at least, to the most senior levels of the Pakistani government. What the High Commission in West Pakistan was doing, however, was not reported to us in the East. We were responsible to them, they were not responsible to us'.<sup>512</sup>

Collins continues, 'We also went occasionally to the cantonment to see the Pakistani military people, and on occasion you could see young Bengali resistance men brought in, and they looked pretty miserable because they knew what lay ahead of them. But one couldn't turn to a Pakistani officer, and say, "Don't shoot that man!" It would have been quite useless for us to make appeals to Pakistani officers. And if we had said anything, it wouldn't have affected their actions, because they were just carrying out orders from their superiors'.<sup>513</sup> 'It was our business to *report* what was going on, and for other people to put the pressure on'.<sup>514</sup>

As for the Dacca High Commission, he explains, 'the problem any Deputy Commissioner had in trying to get a message to the top level of Pakistani government, was that the military were then in charge. There was no longer any civilian government. In 1970, when life was more or less normal, I or the Deputy High Commissioner would meet with senior civilian officials posted in Dacca. After the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, there was one general there who was in charge of the crackdown—Tikka Khan—and *he* wasn't interested in talking to anyone. He was a military headquarters man making his military dispositions'.<sup>515</sup> 'But, in the end, what was of particular concern to us? Our own people. A policy of intervention has to be decided by headquarters. It was a matter for London, and for our High Commissioner in Islamabad to make representations to the people who really mattered, the people who actually controlled it all'.<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>513</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>514</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>515</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>516</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

Reflecting on whether the High Commissioner in Islamabad had in fact expressed concern about the violence to Pakistani authorities, Collins declares: ‘I’m not convinced that we were doing all that we could do. I *simply* do not know. These things are not necessarily divulged to the lower levels. There’s a general policy in the Foreign Office that you’re told what you need to know; you’re not told what you don’t need to know....In such sensitive conditions, these things have to be done with a high degree of discretion, otherwise they’re ineffective. It may have been done, but it wasn’t the High Commissioner’s responsibility to report to us. He was responsible to London. So if the Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, was giving instructions to that effect, then the High Commissioner would have carried them out. If Edward Heath, the Prime Minister, wanted something done, the High Commissioner would have obeyed his instructions’.<sup>517</sup>

### ***Islamabad: the British High Commission***

#### *No instructions during what appeared to be a civil war*

According to Peter Smith, neither the Prime Minister nor the Foreign Office gave the British High Commission in Islamabad any directions during the 1971 crisis in Pakistan—‘we were left alone’.<sup>518</sup> The only exception was when London asked the High Commissioner to make ‘personal representations’ to the Pakistani President on Sheikh Mujib’s behalf—‘not because they actually cared so much,’ Smith clarifies, ‘so much as, you have to be able to *say* you’re doing these things to Parliament’.<sup>519</sup>

As for the violence, ‘[o]bviously there were nasty things going on, but in any civil war, very nasty things go on. However, I didn’t get the impression of any mass cruelty going on. It was just the reaction of a central government to a rebellion. Now, whether they used too much force is another question. All I can say is, looking back

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<sup>517</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>518</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>519</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.



with a *very* deficient memory, it seems to me unlikely that there would have been any organized “genocide” (if we have to use that term), but undoubtedly, a certain carelessness about who and how many were killed. I mean, as the Pakistanis said, “they’re nothing but bloody Bengalis!” Probably, if I had seen the text of that resolution [Parliamentary Motion 592 ‘Genocide in East Pakistan’<sup>520</sup>] in 1971, I would have thought it was overstating the case’.<sup>521</sup>

*Impediments to intelligence: discerning facts from official representation*

Not only was it challenging to understand what was happening during the crisis, Smith continues, diplomats are actively prevented from knowing. ‘One of the difficulties of being in the foreign service is you go to a place, and the first people you meet are the officials, or the politicians, and if you are in a place that is only nominally a democracy like Islamabad, then you find it very difficult to get at the truth, or the truth about the other side’.<sup>523</sup> ‘You have to remember that the people we met were *selected*. You can’t ever believe *anything* as a diplomat!’<sup>524</sup> ‘I went to Dacca in the summer of 1971. My route was known. So I wouldn’t have seen any horrors, they would’ve been kept away from me.’<sup>525</sup> ‘It’s difficult for government representatives. They are in a state of “impotence”. I wasn’t in a position to see or say; it’s very hard to get at the truth’.<sup>526</sup>

*The parliamentary delegation’s experience*

James Ramsden and Toby Jessel, members of the British parliamentary delegation who visited India and Pakistan from 21 June to 3 July 1971, confirm the difficulties of trying

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<sup>520</sup> FCO 37/888. Early Day Motion 592 ‘Genocide in East Bengal and the Recognition of Bangladesh’, 15 June 1971; enclosed in notes prepared for the Foreign Secretary’s use at the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan. (Appendix Documents 9a and 9b)

<sup>521</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>523</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>524</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>525</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

<sup>526</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

to establish responsibility for the mass violence then occurring in East Pakistan.<sup>527</sup> Both former Conservative MPs describe the experience as one that marked them deeply. They have retained numerous documents relating to the delegation's visit, including tape recordings, photos and notes they made at the time.

In West Pakistan, the delegation met with senior government officials, including Yahya Khan, who declared they were free to go where they pleased. In the East, however, Martial Law Authorities insisted on guiding them through the province, pointing out areas where Bengali insurgents had committed acts of sabotage and, on occasion, atrocities against non-Bengalis.<sup>528</sup> At the delegation's request, they were also shown other areas—large swathes of land and (usually Hindu) villages destroyed 'out of necessity'<sup>529</sup> by the Pakistani army during counter-insurgency operations. Afterwards, they were escorted to functioning villages where, they were told, the army was mounting a 'win the hearts and minds'<sup>530</sup> campaign to restore confidence.

The delegation was then introduced to local British businessmen who, for the most part, supported the military operations.<sup>532</sup> They watched a parade of 'Civil Armed Forces' or reconstituted police forces made up of non-Bengalis. They met with 'Peace Committees' of Bengalis who supported the central government and who complained that their relatives were being forcefully detained by India in the so-called refugee camps in order, they believed, to stoke international opinion against the Khan government.<sup>533</sup> During the delegation's final days in the province, they toured a hospital sheltering non-Bengalis, who had allegedly been attacked by nationalist mobs.

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<sup>527</sup> James Ramsden (Conservative MP for Harrowgate, 1954 - 1974), Personal Interview by author, 21 September 2009, Ripon UK; Toby Jessel (Conservative MP for Twickenham, 1970 - 1997), Personal Interview by author, 26 September 2009, London UK.

<sup>528</sup> James Ramsden, Interview by author, 21 September 2009; Toby Jessel, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>529</sup> James Ramsden, 'East Bengal 1971' (written account), enclosed in 11 September 2009 email to author.

<sup>530</sup> James Ramsden, 'East Bengal 1971'.

<sup>532</sup> James Ramsden, 'East Bengal 1971'; James Ramsden, Interview by author, 21 September 2009; Toby Jessel, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>533</sup> James Ramsden, Interview by author, 21 September 2009; Ramsden has conserved his impressions of these meetings on tape recordings he made during the tour, to which he provided me access.

‘We felt the government’s purpose in getting us to go to these places was to make us see that the violence had not been all one sided,’ recorded Jessel in his tour notes.<sup>535</sup> Yet ‘surreptitious questioning of reliable local people indicated that: (i) Hindu villages in surrounding country...had recently been attacked by the army. (ii) People taken into custody by the army were taken into a compound close by one of the missions and were never seen again. About 20 shots a day had been heard, until a few days previously when they had stopped. A number of corpses had been floating about in the river nearby’.<sup>536</sup>

In the Indian provinces of Tripura and West Bengal, after meeting with Indira Gandhi, as well as refugee camp authorities and NGO representatives, the delegation was presented with a contrasting picture. Hundreds of thousands of East Bengali refugees, mainly Hindus, many shot or mutilated, were crowded into makeshift camps suffering from malnutrition and disease.<sup>538</sup> Thousands more continued to arrive by boat or foot. According to Jessel, ‘This was the shocking part’ where they were finally able to make sense of what they had seen in East Pakistan.<sup>539</sup> ‘We each asked many refugees, selected at random, where they had come from, why they had come, and if they would return. Overwhelmingly they said they had come because their villages or others nearby, had been attacked by the Pakistani army; people (often relatives) had been shot, girls raped, and houses burned or knocked down. They had fled for their lives; and would return only when it was safe, or when Mujib said it was safe or if the Army left. A large proportion of recent refugees were Hindu....Naturally we were shocked by what we encountered’.<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Toby Jessel, 1971 Tour Notes (in Jessel Personal Papers), page 4.

<sup>536</sup> Jessel 1971 Tour Notes, page 5.

<sup>538</sup> James Ramsden, ‘West Bengal 1971’ (written account), enclosed in 20 September 2009 email to author; James Ramsden, Interview by author, 21 September 2009; Toby Jessel, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>539</sup> Toby Jessel, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>540</sup> Jessel 1971 Tour Notes, page 6.

Arthur Collins, of the Dacca Deputy High Commission, recalls that another parliamentary delegation which had visited Pakistan earlier that year had undergone a similar experience: ‘They’d been briefed in London, they’d been briefed in Islamabad, then they came to Dacca, and I told them what was happening. They were then taken by their West Pakistani hosts on a tour of Dacca, after which, they said they’d been shown everything, and the place looked pretty nice! So I said, “I’ll show you things you perhaps haven’t seen yet”....I took them to Old Dacca and showed them the central area, which had been burnt to the ground. They were absolutely shocked, and said “we were shown *nothing* of this, why were we not shown this?” There was, most certainly, a contrast between the official line—and what actually happened’.<sup>541</sup>

*Britain was not responsible*

Peter Smith, in Islamabad, states that he could not have understood the various dimensions of violence, including that of state terror, characterising the crisis in East Pakistan. He appeared sincerely surprised and troubled when shown reports of atrocities allegedly committed by government forces, which he admits he would have read in 1971. ‘I have little memory of that time—not only little memory of the facts, but also of the feelings’.<sup>542</sup> ‘But you couldn’t have done anything about it, of course. They were addressed to London, for one thing, and we had no power to do anything anyway’.<sup>543</sup>

‘...and those telegrams,’ Smith continues, ‘naturally, would have gone to the government in London, and they would have known. But what could they have done?’<sup>544</sup> The problem is that ‘Britain has an inherited responsibility which it cannot exercise. She’s like a grandmother—she can tell her grandchildren what to do, but of

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<sup>541</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>542</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>543</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>544</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

course they're not going to listen. Why should they?!'<sup>545</sup> 'So did we know? Yes, I think we did know, but we didn't know where the responsibility lay. Awful things were happening (possibly on both sides, but certainly by the Pakistani Army), but *who* was responsible for it?'<sup>546</sup>

*British diplomats: 'the realm of the possible'*<sup>547</sup>

'Diplomacy is a subtle kind of life.... You just do what you can within the realm of the possible,' remarks Arthur Collins.<sup>548</sup> Military intervention, he notes for example, simply 'wasn't feasible. During the November 1970 cyclones, Britain sent a military taskforce to East Pakistan from Singapore. Royal marines arrived at Dacca airport with insufficient technical clearance and were surrounded by the Pakistani Army, until we sorted out on what basis these British troops had arrived in East Pakistan. We probably had a small brigade in Singapore. The Pakistan Army was a huge Army—many, many thousands. If the British had tried to siege Dacca, it could have erupted into a big affair'.<sup>549</sup> (Ian McCluney agrees: Britain could not, and would not, have considered militarily intervening in a conflict between two major sovereign countries, each with their own sophisticated military forces—'It was not like a conflict in some underdeveloped African country.'<sup>550</sup>) All the same, Collins emphasizes, 'I wouldn't wish you to draw the conclusion that we were in any way *indifferent* to what was going on. We were not indifferent'.<sup>551</sup>

When asked to comment on the fact that the British government did not publicly (nor, for the most part, privately) acknowledge reports of state terror which he himself compiled, Collins responded: 'I believe there was a strong case for telling the Pakistani

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<sup>545</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

<sup>546</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>547</sup> The famous phrase 'politics is the art of the possible' is attributed to Otto von Bismarck (1815 - 1898).

<sup>548</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>549</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>550</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>551</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

authorities that “reports had reached us of atrocities, and we sincerely hoped they were not true, and if they were true, that steps would immediately be taken to ensure that the humane rules of war were followed.” There could be no justification for such acts, particularly within the Commonwealth context. But we had to be careful because it was internal—it was their business. It was purely internal business, and we would not have wanted to disrupt the Commonwealth relationship’.<sup>552</sup>

‘As a diplomat, one is aware of the possibility of peaceful resolution of most differences of view; one is aware of the answer lying in political accommodation. One could *see* that the answer was not in military repression. To that extent we felt a natural affinity with East Bengalis, but we had to keep that in check because we were accredited to Pakistan. On the other hand, we understood West Pakistan’s desire to preserve the integrity of the country’.<sup>553</sup> Diplomats on the subcontinent, it would appear, felt themselves powerless (physically and politically) to affect the situation. They considered themselves, in Collins’ words, ‘in a bit of a bind’<sup>554</sup>—unable and unauthorized to change the course of violence in the region, yet sympathetic to its human consequences.

### ***London: the Foreign Office***

#### *The role of historical analogies during the crisis*

At a conference in 2009 on Britain and the Cold War, Douglas Hurd (Heath’s former Political Secretary and later Foreign Secretary from 1989-1995), was asked to comment on his oft-quoted statement that, “Widely used, history can give pleasure and provide us with a useful tool; but we should not become its slaves”.<sup>555</sup> Hurd responded that this

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<sup>552</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>553</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>554</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 18 June 2009.

<sup>555</sup> Douglas Hurd (Berlin, 18 April 2005), quoted by David Reynolds during ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation with David Reynolds’, seminar at the *Britain and the Cold War: 23<sup>rd</sup> Summer Conference of the Centre for Contemporary British History*, Institute of Historical Research, London UK, 22 June 2009.

was indeed his point of view—policy makers should and do make decisions according to contemporary concerns, and while these decisions are certainly informed by past events, this should be kept to a minimum or one risks losing grasp of present realities.<sup>556</sup> Hurd continued by remarking on the fact that researchers constantly ask him to explain why he and other officials chose to adopt one policy over another towards a given external affair. Regrettably, he tells them, isolating the various motivations behind foreign policy is virtually impossible. Government ministers have heavily-laden schedules in which world events are lodged together: ‘The life of a foreign secretary is chaotic....Individual issues are handled in a situation of pell mell. You can rarely get away and think about any issue for twenty-four hours—decisions are taken within a web of other concerns’.<sup>557</sup> (He declined my request for an interview, writing that while he ‘usually liked to help Ph.D. students...this time it is beyond my power....I do not recall becoming involved at any time in the secession of Bangladesh’.<sup>558</sup>)

Ian McCluney, Assistant Private Secretary to Douglas-Home in 1971, agrees with Hurd that foreign policy decisions are often taken hurriedly. While he does not recall how this may have affected decision-making during the East Pakistan crisis, he remembers how FCO officials of the era were faced daily with a great pile of telegrams, which they had to select, read, write an assessment of, and get to the Foreign Secretary (ideally before other colleagues did).<sup>559</sup> The Foreign Secretary, in turn, was confronted nightly with this mass of information relating to events around the globe, and had to then decide what position to take by morning.<sup>560</sup>

There was, in consequence, little time to craft policy based on an informed understanding of the situation in question—or relevant circumstances in the past. Hence Peter Beck, in his study on the functionality of history at the Foreign Office from

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<sup>556</sup> ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation’, 22 June 2009.

<sup>557</sup> ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation’, 22 June 2009.

<sup>558</sup> Douglas Hurd, Letter to author, 9 May 2009.

<sup>559</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>560</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

1950 to 1976, explores ‘the use, more frequently the non-use, of history by administrators and policy makers’.<sup>561</sup> There is a gap between history and policy making, he contends, with public policy having an ‘erratic, often detached, relationship with...historians’.<sup>562</sup> Policymakers of the period, it may even be said, ‘ignored’ history, and past precedents no matter how pertinent, were rarely consulted.<sup>563</sup> As Lord Strang observed, ‘Decisions on foreign policy have often to be taken at short notice on incomplete information and with not much time for thought. Ministers are very busy and harassed men. They cannot...bear to read long and elaborate disquisitions. Their orders to their advisers are almost invariably: “Do please try to keep it short”’.<sup>564</sup>

With regards to East Pakistan, it is true that, the Heath government did not appear to use (nor misuse) history to any great extent. Foreign Office files on the crisis rarely referred to past events that were arguably linked—namely Britain’s (divisive) imperial rule of the subcontinent, its subsequent departure and role in drawing the boundaries of the successor states, the widespread communal violence between Hindus and Muslims after partition, as well as the two Indo-Pakistan wars that were to follow. (Indeed, it was during these events that Britain set a firm precedent for non-intervention in the subcontinent in the post-independence era, a fact that will be related in the next chapter.) The Heath government’s lack of reference to them implies that its reactions to the break-up of Pakistan were not conditioned by an overt sense of historical consciousness. The recent past by comparison—the Nigerian civil war—was evoked much more often (by parliamentarians, not by government officials) as a reason to refrain from acting in Commonwealth civil wars.

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<sup>561</sup> Peter Beck, *Using History, Making British Policy: The Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950-76*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

<sup>562</sup> Beck *Using History*, 17.

<sup>563</sup> Beck *Using History*, 240.

<sup>564</sup> Beck quoting Lord Strang (Permanent Undersecretary of State, Foreign Office 1949 - 1953), in *Using History*, 15.



Yet while the government may have ‘used’ history only to a marginal degree—namely, as a deterrent to direct involvement—it was not because it was wilfully ignoring it. Rather, officials (particularly in the South Asia Department) appeared to have been wholly absorbed in analysing the daily flow of information emerging from the subcontinent, as well as monitoring British public opinion, and adjusting their policy recommendations accordingly. Senior officials, for their part, relied heavily on these summaries and recommendations (there is no evidence that either Heath or Home ever scripted anything independently on the crisis) in order to gain a basic understanding of what the Prime Minister described as an ‘area...so racked by confusion, fear and lawlessness, as well as having to contend with great natural disasters’.<sup>565</sup> This understanding, moreover, needed to be constantly updated. As the Prime Minister admitted to his Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs six months into the crisis: ‘I find it very difficult to follow in detail the course of events concerning the refugees from East Pakistan, the activities of the voluntary agencies, the United Nations effort and where each of these stand in relation to the Indian and Pakistan governments’.<sup>566</sup> HMG’s policy in 1971 was, in other words, primarily a reactive one—grounded in the then current events on the subcontinent—which officials, both at the time and since, repeat were markedly difficult to grasp.

Former South Asia Department officials (some of who had obtained undergraduate degrees in South Asian studies prior to assuming their positions and were thus versed in the region’s history) confirm that past precedents could factor only minimally into their assessments during the Pakistan crisis owing to their heightened workload during the period. Indeed, they say, their tasks were so onerous, they barely remember the nature of the crisis itself, but instead those aspects in which the Foreign Office was directly involved: meetings with leaders from the subcontinent, and the

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<sup>565</sup> PREM 15/569. Text of Edward Heath’s message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 1360, FCO—Islamabad, 29 July 1971.

<sup>566</sup> PREM 15/569. Note, Edward Heath—Peter Moon, 9 September 1971.

drama surrounding British evacuations from the region. Andrew Stuart, for example, formerly stationed at the Pakistan desk, admits that:

The only two actions which I remember...were when HMG decided...to fly British nationals away from West Pakistan, out of the way of Indian bombing and secondly when Mr. Bhutto decided to release Sheikh Mujib from imprisonment in West Pakistan and fly him to London. In the Foreign Office we received the (totally unexpected) information when he was already in the air and I, and the relevant FCO minister Anthony Royle [the Under Secretary of State], went to Heathrow to meet him. There we asked him what he wanted to do and he said he wished to return to Bangladesh as quickly as possible. We therefore borrowed an RAF plane and sent him eastwards....We held no formal or informal discussions with him as he was obviously extremely tired and somewhat disorientated.<sup>567</sup>

This, according to Stuart, compromises the extent of his memories of the crisis.

Richard Fell, a junior officer at the Pakistan desk responsible for assessing reports from the region, recalls precisely the same events.<sup>568</sup> The only other aspects he says he remembers with clarity were the stream of constant paperwork in the office and the fact that reports from diplomats in East and West Pakistan could be fairly perplexing; they described different forms of violence and often contradicted each other, indicating to London that there was no single guilty party *per se*—or that regional intelligence itself was flawed. (Interestingly, Fell, who was twenty-five at the time, has no recollection of the Foreign Office's December 1971 legal opinion pertaining to genocide in East Pakistan, despite the document being addressed to him.<sup>569</sup>)

John Birch, of the India Desk, agrees that there was a tangible sense of disarray in the South Asia Department at the time. 'We spent our days reading telegrams and making thorough assessments which we then sent to the Cabinet Joint Intelligence Committee. During that time, there was so much going on in East Pakistan we were just trying to cope with events as they happened'.<sup>570</sup> From the cyclones in 1970

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<sup>567</sup> Andrew Stuart (FCO South Asia Department, Pakistan Desk, 1971 - 1972), Email to author, 17 July 2009.

<sup>568</sup> Richard Fell, Interview by author, 16 July 2009.

<sup>569</sup> FCO 37/1016. Internal legal opinion: applicability of the UN Genocide Convention and the 1949 Geneva Conventions to Pakistan, the UN Economic and Social Department—SAD, 16 December 1971. (Appendix Document 12)

<sup>570</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

onwards, ‘it was all a blur’, leaving little time to reflect on the past.<sup>571</sup>

*Perception: civil war*

*Avoid discussing systematic state terror*

Owing to the intense departmental flurry, the standard ‘pell mell’<sup>572</sup> of the Foreign Office, and the rather contradictory depiction of events emerging from the region, London’s dominant perception of the crisis remained that of a civil war, involving atrocities on ‘both sides’. The inconvenient possibility that systematic state terror, possibly constituting genocide was transpiring at the same time—despite two Foreign Office legal opinions indicating it likely was—was seemingly not discussed. Not surprisingly, mention of this provocative term caused the government considerable agitation. In early July, for example, word reached Whitehall that John Stonehouse was going to personally appeal to the Security Council to condemn Pakistan’s actions as a breach of the 1948 Genocide Convention—and that he had the support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. ‘Stonehouse,’ British officials in India reported, ‘was now considering whether, how and when to explore this particular bomb’.<sup>573</sup>

A cluster of alarmed telegrams followed, assessing whether the MP, ‘armed with such ammunition’, would also pursue ‘the genocide question’ in London, and whether the UNHCR did in fact support his efforts.<sup>574</sup> India’s English-language daily *The Statesman*, it was noted with concern, was publicising Stonehouse’s controversial actions, including his plan to allegedly petition for ‘a UN task force...to Bangladesh to stop the genocide being committed there by the Pakistani Army. Mr Stonehouse also wanted an international commission of jurists sent...to consider the case of genocide’

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<sup>571</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

<sup>572</sup> ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation’, 22 June 2009.

<sup>573</sup> FCO 37/889. Telegram 1751 ‘John Stonehouse MP’, New Delhi—FCO, 9 July 1971.

<sup>574</sup> FCO 37/889. Minute ‘Delhi Telegram No 1751 of 9 July: Mr John Stonehouse MP’, SAD—UN E&S Dept, 9 July 1971; FCO 37/889. Minute, FCO—SAD, 15 July 1971; FCO 37/889. Minute, SAD—FCO, 15 July 1971; FCO 37/889. Telegram 1117 ‘Your Tel No 1751 to FCO: John Stonehouse MP’, FCO—New Delhi, 15 July 1971.

and promised 'to put pressure on the British Government to move these proposals at...the Security Council'.<sup>575</sup> 'Mr Stonehouse felt that world conscience had at last been stirred,' the newspaper enthusiastically concluded.<sup>576</sup>

Stonehouse, and the parliamentarians who supported him, continued to push the House of Commons to debate 'Genocide in East Bengal'<sup>577</sup> and the possibility of multilateral intervention through the United Nations. Throughout the conflict, however, Britain refrained from acknowledging those aspects of the crisis that would have potentially validated such pressure. Instead, having agreed that pursuing the question of genocide was futile and would 'serve no useful purpose',<sup>578</sup> the conflict was described as a civil war, because that is what it appeared to be in the main, and because acknowledging other aspects would likely have 'precipitated public controversy',<sup>579</sup> causing the government unnecessary embarrassment. These sentiments, of course, were not explicitly expressed outside of the two confidential legal opinions, but they were implied by what was, for the most part, a non-discussion of the issue of systematic violence.

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<sup>575</sup> FCO 37/889. 'British M.P.'s Three Point Proposal', *The Statesman* (India), 8 July 1971.

<sup>576</sup> 'British M.P.'s Three Point Proposal', 8 July 1971.

<sup>577</sup> FCO 37/888. Early Day Motion 592 'Genocide in East Bengal and the Recognition of Bangladesh', 15 June 1971.

<sup>578</sup> FCO 37/888. 'Notes for supplementaries' prepared for the Foreign Secretary's use at the 23 June 1971 House of Commons debate on East Pakistan.

<sup>579</sup> FCO 37/1016. Internal legal opinion, 16 December 1971.

***Summary: diplomats and the East Pakistan crisis***

The experiences of British officials on the subcontinent and in the Foreign Office during the East Pakistan crisis reflect an array of political priorities and practical realities, which generally reinforced the government's preference for neutrality and non-interference.

In Pakistan, diplomats in both wings of the country aimed to document the crisis as accurately as possible, yet limited sources of information and restricted mobility under the 'fog of war and atrocity'<sup>580</sup> impeded their efforts. British representatives, furthermore, were occupied with various duties (of which protecting nationals took priority), and frequently in the company of local authorities. They, and other British observers who toured the region, had to constantly discern reality from the state-endorsed interpretation of events that, at best, conveyed only partial information; most often, 'the horrors' were kept away.<sup>581</sup> Compiling sound situation assessments under such conditions was exceedingly difficult. Of no small significance in this regard, was the unusual territorial structure of the country, which meant that diplomats in East and West Pakistan frequently held differing provincial angles on the crisis, and framed events to London in a manner that was, at times, contradictory.

Foreign Office officials receiving these varied interpretations of the crisis, some dispassionate, others implicitly critical, suspected those who submitted the latter were partial or 'less than objective',<sup>582</sup> particularly if they had intimate knowledge of the region, or described events in what could be regarded as an "emotional"<sup>583</sup> manner. This suspicion effectively undermined the credibility of their reports and possibly underscored the change of leadership at High Commissions in both wings of Pakistan.

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<sup>580</sup> Editorial on the East Pakistan crisis, *The Sunday Times* (London), 13 June 1971.

<sup>581</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009; Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>582</sup> FCO 37/885. Report 'Situation in EastPak' (handwritten annotation), SAD—FCO (internal circulation), 13 April 1971.

<sup>583</sup> Term reportedly applied to Deputy High Commissioner Frank Sargeant's reporting of the crisis, quoted in Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 323.

Officials in London, it is to be remembered, made decisions on these issues at short notice with little time for reflection amidst the ‘web of other concerns’<sup>584</sup> at the Foreign Office, seeking to meet the heightened workload imposed by the distant crisis.

Officials at all levels of government appeared to be in a dilemma; none unequivocally supported the Pakistani military campaign against suspected Bengali dissidents, yet it was accepted that a state threatened with a nationalist insurgency, would take measures to preserve its territorial integrity (*albeit* Britain directly supporting such a state, as in the recent past, was not viewed favourably, given the controversy that involvement had generated). However brutal these measures may have been, nationalists and locals in East Pakistan also appeared to be guilty of gratuitous violence, effectively blurring the line between perpetrator and victim. Attributing responsibility for the crisis was thus no straightforward task. Responsibility to express concern to the Pakistani government about events, meanwhile, was considered to be the domain of superiors. Finally, reports from the region did not indicate victims numbering in the millions; there was no knowledge whatsoever, officials repeat, of such high figures.

These testimonies, overall, provide insights into the diffusion of responsibility within the British government, the compartmentalization of duties, the sense of distance the British felt towards events, why dissent (if felt) was difficult to express and, finally, how government perceptions were shaped. The conclusion that policy-makers ultimately drew from this situation was that East Pakistan was embroiled in a bitter medium-scale civil war fuelled by reciprocal atrocities; such a complex communal conflict not only justified but required neutrality on the part of external governments, as the experience of the Nigerian civil war had apparently demonstrated. Anything which challenged this interpretation, be it regional officials who meticulously documented acts

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<sup>584</sup> ‘Lord Hurd in Conversation’, 22 June 2009.

of state terror, parliamentarians who demanded to debate whether these acts constituted genocide, or the conclusions of internal legal opinions, was generally disapproved of or disregarded.

#### IV. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Britain's responses to the East Pakistan crisis in 1971 were largely shaped by circumstantial factors described in the last chapters, particularly: the reports compiled by diplomats working amidst the conflict, the Foreign Office's interpretation and perception of these in the context of other world affairs, public and parliamentary pressure, and finally, the government's numerous practical and humanitarian priorities vis-a-vis the subcontinent. All of these influencing elements unfolded against the geopolitical divisions and international paralysis characteristic of the Cold War era, and taken together, led the government to adopt an approach that incorporated both reserve and initiative.

Notwithstanding the significance of the above, this chapter illustrates how British responses to the crisis were also conditioned by an array of other circumstances, overlapping between the contextual and the historical. These affected the crisis only indirectly, but nevertheless constituted the backdrop for the government's choices in 1971, and relate largely to Britain's bumpy post-war transition into a secondary European power that, as it receded from former spheres of activity, employed both intervention and retreat to manage crises in its former colonies. By the 1970s, the latter (non-intervention) appeared to be the strategy of choice, leading experienced observers to conclude:

The British public, having shed the Empire, tends to concentrate its attention somewhat narrowly on its own back garden...External affairs tend to be regarded as a succession of crises, which we would be as well to keep out of if we can; and, as our imperial past recedes, this feeling of non-involvement is more easily sustained.<sup>586</sup>

With regards to the subcontinent, it will be demonstrated that this proclivity towards non-intervention was exhibited immediately following Indian independence, and in the decades subsequent, when time and again the Commonwealth proved ineffective as a

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<sup>586</sup> Cyril Pickard, 'The Formulation of Foreign Policy—the Background', paper presented at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Postgraduate Seminar, *Commonwealth Relations: The Commonwealth and Contemporary British Diplomacy*, University of London, 18 January 1977.



forum of resolution and Britain turned to bilateral diplomacy to cultivate its regional interests. This broad overview, starting at partition and ending with the crisis, while again not immediately related to the latter in all of its details, permits a holistic understanding of Anglo-Pakistan and Anglo-Indian relations in the post-independence era—providing key insights into the subtext for Britain’s reactions to the 1971 crisis in the context of its wider post-war historical trajectory.

The Eurocentric vision of the British Prime Minister, Edward Heath, was of course pivotal in this trajectory, and as the Commonwealth and other external priorities receded into the background, Europe dominated the government’s foreign policy, absorbing the greater part of its attention. As the former Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca ruminated: ‘Could we have done more [during the crisis]? Should we have done more? At the end of the day, you have to ask yourself what were the main concerns of the British Cabinet? At that time, it was becoming members of the European Community. That was Edward Heath’s main preoccupation’.<sup>587</sup>

This ‘preoccupation’, it is important to point out, did not prevent the Heath government from remaining moderately active in international affairs, as demonstrated by their diplomatic and aid-related initiatives during the crisis. Their efforts with regards to the latter are, in fact, but one example amongst several small-scale overseas endeavours, described below, that the government undertook during the period; these endeavours, while rarely achieving their intended aims, demonstrate that HMG’s focus in the early 1970s was not exclusively on Britain’s ‘back garden’, at least to the extent previously assumed. Europe and the domestic sphere, of course, remained the highest priority, surpassing relations with both the USA and the Commonwealth, and implicitly conditioned policy making during the crisis; as such, they merit description along with the government’s activities further a field. The broad post-war context in which the

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<sup>587</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

Heath government functioned—the domestic and foreign policy initiatives and challenges that, for the most part—indirectly shaped its responses to the East Pakistan crisis, is thus the subject of the following chapter.

### **i. 1970-1974: THE HEATH GOVERNMENT**

#### ***Foreign policy: Europe***

British foreign policy under Edward Heath, it is widely acknowledged, had one primary aim: joining the European Economic Community. On 30 June 1970, only 11 days after the Conservatives took office, UK-EEC negotiations began. For Heath, entering Europe was the best way to avoid another European war, stimulate British industry, and find a role for Britain after two decades of decolonization had rendered the Empire all but a memory.<sup>588</sup> The Foreign Office agreed: Europe “lies at the centre of our policies”.<sup>589</sup> Failure to develop links “would leave Britain increasingly on the margins of events—both political and economic”.<sup>590</sup>

The prospect of European entry, of course, was not novel—Britain, since the end of World War II, had been drawing closer to the continent, attracted by the promise of collective European security, economic stimulus, and counter-balancing American power. Indeed, Churchill had indicated the path which post-war British politics would take in 1946 with his entreaty to continental leaders “to re-create the European family, or as much of it as we can, and provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe”.<sup>591</sup> Between 1948 and 1949, Britain became a founding member of a number of

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<sup>588</sup> For discussion, see Anthony Seldon, ‘The Heath Government in History’, in *The Heath Government, 1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, eds. Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (London: Longmans, 1996), 4-5.

<sup>589</sup> FCO ‘Summary of Current Problems in HMG’s Foreign Policy’, n. d. June 1970. Quoted in Andrea Benvenuti, ‘The Heath Government and British Defence Policy in Southeast Asia at the End of Empire (1970–71)’, *Twentieth Century British History Advance Access* (12 December 2008), 8, <http://tcbh.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/hwn042v1> (last accessed 5 February 2009).

<sup>590</sup> FCO ‘Summary of Current Problems’, as quoted in Benvenuti ‘Southeast Asia’, 8.

<sup>591</sup> Winston Churchill, Zurich Switzerland, 19 September 1946. Quoted in Denis MacShane, *Heath, The 20 British Prime Ministers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Haus Publishing Limited, 2006), 34.

organizations aimed at fostering European integration, including the Western European Union (1948) and the Council of Europe (1949). It was also a co-founder of NATO (1949), the transatlantic defence organization considered vital to Western Europe's post-war security.

Finally, in 1961, Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan submitted Britain's first European membership application. The act vexed a number of MPs, both on the left and the right, who still believed Britain's interests lay further abroad, and that European entry threatened a loss of identity, sovereignty and economic independence. Possibly in order to assuage such concerns, Britain's participation in the Western European Union and the Council of Europe turned out to be somewhat half-hearted, suggesting to some leaders on the continent that 'London would never concede any effective supranational power in partnership with other European nations'.<sup>592</sup>

After the French vetoed Britain's 1961 bid, Parliament continued debating European entry, and those in favour gradually increased. However, it was not until Edward Heath's premiership that Britain's crawl towards Europe transformed into a decisive march. Heath was a 'well-known Europhile'.<sup>593</sup> During the 1930s, he was staunchly against appeasement, having accused Chamberlain of "turning all *four* cheeks to European dictatorship".<sup>594</sup> His service in the British Navy during WWII reinforced his commitment to collective European defence. 'Heath's decade as a military man, on active and reserve service, was an important part of his life,' states Denis MacShane, Labour MP and author of a slim (unauthorized) biography of the Tory leader. '...Heath knew a Europe of war and worked for a Europe of peace'.<sup>595</sup>

Indeed, Heath's maiden speech to the House of Commons in 1950 centred on the benefits of European unity, at the time, through the proposed European Coal and

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<sup>592</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 37.

<sup>593</sup> Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 7.

<sup>594</sup> As quoted in MacShane *Heath*, 151; emphasis in original.

<sup>595</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 11.

Steel Community. A decade later, as Macmillan's Minister of Labour, Heath negotiated vigorously for a year and half to get Britain's EEC bid accepted, earning him the reputation of his Party's 'most dedicated European'<sup>596</sup> or, as political commentator Hugo Young declared, "the most qualified 'European' in Tory politics".<sup>597</sup>

Heath was, moreover, an enthusiastic party policy-maker who 'had his hands firmly on the tiller of policy making'<sup>598</sup> before and after taking office. The strong 'style and personality of the Prime Minister [was]...central to the government's working'<sup>599</sup>—"In public and in private, it was a Heath government throughout".<sup>600</sup> Under such leadership, British foreign policy in the early 1970s was, in many respects, a Europe policy. This for many analysts, constituted the 'most profound revolution'<sup>601</sup> in British official thinking in the twentieth century.

Other traditional spheres of external activity became somewhat secondary—even Britain's 'special relationship' with the USA (although, to what extent, is debateable). From the perspective of Heath's biographer, John Campbell: 'The most radical aspect of Heath's foreign policy—differentiating his Government sharply from every previous post war administration, Conservative or Labour, and from all his successors over the next sixteen years as well—was his determination *not* to have a special relationship with the United States'.<sup>602</sup> Hugo Young agrees: Heath was "by the standards of post-war convention, a less convinced Atlanticist than any other British leader".<sup>603</sup> For Kissinger, it was remarkable how "[p]aradoxically, while the other European leaders strove to improve their relations with us...Heath went in the opposite

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<sup>596</sup> Martin Holmes, *The Failure of the Heath Government*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), 3.

<sup>597</sup> Quoted in Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 7.

<sup>598</sup> John Ramsden, 'The Prime Minister and the Making of Policy,' in *1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, 22.

<sup>599</sup> Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 21.

<sup>600</sup> David Butler and David Kavanagh (1974), as quoted in Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 21; Lewis Baston and Anthony Seldon also describe how Heath's personality influenced policy in 'Number 10 under Edward Heath,' in *1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, 47-74.

<sup>601</sup> David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 224.

<sup>602</sup> Campbell *Heath: A Biography*, 341.

<sup>603</sup> Quoted in MacShane *Heath*, 76.

direction. His relations with us were always correct, but they rarely rose above a basic reserve that prevented—in the name of Europe—the close co-operation with us that was his for the taking”.<sup>604</sup> These comments imply that Heath shied from the traditional closeness of Anglo-American relations as a matter of policy, a policy that was at once pro-European and subtly anti-American.

In contrast, historians Christopher Hill and Christopher Lord, while accepting that Anglo-American relations during the period were discord-ridden, believe that ‘the argument that the Heath government represented a consistent and well-thought-out effort to wean British foreign policy away from the “special relationship” with the US can...be taken too far’.<sup>605</sup> Indeed, early talks demonstrate a ‘determination to play the classic British foreign policy role of staunch and supportive ally’.<sup>606</sup> This, they continue, was subverted by disagreements over America’s withdrawal from the Bretton Woods fixed-currency system and Kissinger’s unannounced visit to China in July of 1971.<sup>607</sup> Anglo-American friction, as illustrated here, also extended to the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, when Heath and President Nixon openly admitted to having “differences of opinion”.<sup>608</sup> For Simon Smith, these were not the product of ‘any ostentatious attempt by the Heath government to distance itself from Washington in order to herald its European credentials’,<sup>609</sup> but were contiguous with each country’s diverging perspectives of Asia since 1945, where Britain’s emphasis on regional relations contrasted with American’s Cold War-oriented calculations. This appears to be correct—Anglo-American relations under Heath during the crisis, while not wholly antagonistic, simply did not reflect the close collaboration one would expect of states

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<sup>604</sup> Quoted in MacShane *Heath*, 75; Kathleen Burke considers this statement in ‘Reflections on Anglo-American Relations during the Cold War’, paper presented at *Britain and the Cold War: 23<sup>rd</sup> Summer Conference of the Centre for Contemporary British History* at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 22 June 2009.

<sup>605</sup> Christopher Hill and Christopher Lord, ‘The Foreign Policy of the Heath Government,’ in *1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, 307.

<sup>606</sup> Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 305.

<sup>607</sup> Young makes a similar argument in *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 15-16, 22.

<sup>608</sup> Nixon quoted in Heath *Autobiography*, 486.

<sup>609</sup> Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 452.

professedly sharing a special relationship, a distance made all the more apparent by the Prime Minister's concerted endeavours to draw nearer to Europe.

The government's rapport with the Commonwealth during this transition suffered similarly, as Britain's trade with states outside of the organisation far exceeded that with its members.<sup>610</sup> Relations had begun to flag in the preceding decades, when it became evident to the British that the association was unlikely to sustain the kind of vital strategic collaboration between members that had originally been hoped for (a phenomenon which will be examined in detail with regard to India and Pakistan). Indeed, already by 1965, a Cabinet Office deputy had concluded that, 'The old concept of the Commonwealth as a cohesive body with common interests in defence and trade, meeting from time to time for secret and informal discussion, and recognising the Queen as its head, had...disappeared'.<sup>611</sup>

Conversely, even as its perceived practical values diminished, the Commonwealth continued to grow, as Britain granted ten territories independence between 1964 and 1971, swelling membership to its highest level ever.<sup>612</sup> Its chief attraction, it would appear, lay in its 'human' value, as an association of states whose common link consisted in a shared social and historical heritage, having been once being under the dominion of Britain. As Heath's Defence Minister, Peter Carrington, put it:

a human connection...[is] probably the most significant element of the Commonwealth....It is not a power bloc. It is not a preferential trading partnership as once it was. It is not an Empire....it consists not of governments but of peoples; and those peoples have at *some* period in their histories been touched by similar influences.<sup>613</sup>

Indeed, from the Prime Minister's perspective in 1971, which he readily voiced at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore from 14 to 22 January, the

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<sup>610</sup> Ashton 'Commonwealth, 1964–71', 78; Overview to 'East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971,' *British Documents on the End of Empire Series*. University of London Institute of Commonwealth Studies. eds. A.N. Porter, S. R. Ashton, and William Roger Louis (London: HMSO, 2004), <http://commonwealth.sas.ac.uk/british.htm#a5> (last accessed 30 March 2012).

<sup>611</sup> Ashton summarizing Philip Rogers, Cabinet Office Deputy Secretary in 1965, 'Commonwealth, 1964–71', 82.

<sup>612</sup> Porter et al., Overview to 'East of Suez and the Commonwealth 1964–1971'.

<sup>613</sup> Carrington *Reflect*, 284; emphasis in original.

group had become merely “a body of friends brought together by history, free to come and go as they wish, to contribute as much or as little as they can”.<sup>614</sup>

The Singapore meeting was one of the first high-level Commonwealth gatherings ever to be held outside of London, and as John Young points out in his analysis of diplomatic practice during the period, the Prime Minister’s office were aware that the new PM was “rather gloomy about finding something useful to talk about”.<sup>615</sup> To make matters worse, it was feared that Britain’s recent proposal to resume arms sales to South Africa (to counter Soviet activity in the Indian Ocean, it was claimed) would be greeted with antagonism, which it was.<sup>616</sup> Afterwards, Heath felt compelled to express on record his opinion that these lengthy meetings merely for “a general chat” were “useless”—“there was no excuse at all for this old-fashioned type of prolonged jamboree”.<sup>617</sup> So it was that his government placed only marginal importance on retaining authority over the institution, and while basic respect for its history and its value as a “concert of convenience”<sup>618</sup> may have endured, Britain’s shift towards Europe meant that the Commonwealth ‘whatever its merits might be, ceased to be the “British” Commonwealth in the 1970s’.<sup>619</sup>

Having distanced himself somewhat from these standard spheres of British foreign policy, by 1971, Heath began preparing vigorously for EEC entry, aware that he and his ministers had little time to win the support of France, the Labour party, and several members of their own party. In other words—precisely as state terror and nationalist insurgency took hold of Pakistan’s eastern wing—the British had to

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<sup>614</sup> Excerpt of Edward Heath’s speech at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, 15 January 1971 (quoted in Heath *Autobiography*, 476-477).

<sup>615</sup> 26 June 1970 Minute to the PM’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs, quoted in Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 150.

<sup>616</sup> See Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 292-293, and Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 150-151.

<sup>617</sup> October 1972 communication between Edward Heath, his Principal Private Secretary and the Cabinet Secretary, quoted in Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 152.

<sup>618</sup> Margaret Ball (1971) quoted in Ashton ‘Commonwealth, 1964-71’, 74.

<sup>619</sup> Robin Neillands, *A Fighting Retreat: The British Empire 1947-1997* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 14.

move<sup>620</sup> on Europe. After a series of talks between Heath and Georges Pompidou in late May 1971, the French President agreed not to veto Britain's bid. At the end of October, Parliament began officially debating the issue, and soon voted on the terms of entry; the government won with a clear majority.<sup>621</sup> Months later, the Prime Minister signed the Treaty of Accession and Britain formally joined the European Community.<sup>622</sup> For Heath, "It was a wildly exciting moment. Just forty years after my first visit to Paris, I had been able to play a part in bringing about the unity of Europe. It was an historic occasion".<sup>623</sup> So it was that the crowning moment of Heath's premiership, and one of the most vigorous periods of government activity, coincided with international disturbances such as the East Pakistan crisis, which although they certainly caused the government concern, did not approach the priority given to matters closer to British shores.

### ***Domestic policy: modernisation***

Joining Europe was intimately tied to Heath's chief domestic aim: modernising Britain. European entry was widely considered to be a key step towards the modernisation of British industry, eventually putting it on par with the more advanced economies on the continent. According to Martin Holmes, Heath's domestic policies of reducing taxes, reforming government machinery and industrial relations law, as well as entering the EEC, were all geared towards 'a regeneration of British industry....For Mr. Heath, the commitment to reinvigorate the economy was a strong personal one'.<sup>624</sup>

The Conservatives had already publicised their commitment to European entry and British industry in their 1966 Manifesto, 'Action not Words. The New Conservative

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<sup>620</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 82.

<sup>621</sup> Stuart Ball, 'A Chronology of the Heath Government' in *1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, 395.

<sup>622</sup> The Treaty of Accession was signed on 22 January 1972; Britain became an official member of the EEC on 1 January 1973.

<sup>623</sup> As quoted in MacShane *Heath*, 90.

<sup>624</sup> Holmes *Failure*, 6.



Programme'.<sup>625</sup> 'Britain must be part of a wider grouping if she is to exert her full influence in the world,' the Manifesto proclaimed. 'British industry must have far bigger markets if it is to develop on the scale required in so many cases by modern technology. This can best be achieved by Britain becoming a member of an enlarged European Economic Community to which she herself has so much to contribute'.<sup>626</sup> Widely acknowledged as one of the most prepared British governments ever to enter office, the manifesto became the 'core' of the Conservatives' 1970 political plan upon taking office.<sup>627</sup> 'For ten years as Tory leader Heath was unwavering in his belief that the twin themes of Europe and modernisation were all that really mattered, or at least that anything else came a long way behind them in importance,' so concludes John Ramsden. 'The policies and policy making mechanisms of the Heath government cannot be adequately understood unless this is constantly borne in mind'.<sup>628</sup>

Britain's pronounced focus in the early 1970s on Europe and domestic affairs indicated to many foreign policy observers at the time that the country was no longer an international power—and that government was finally prepared to recognize this. 'For three decades, the perceptions of British governments of their power and status had lagged behind the changing realities of their international situation, and much substance had been dissipated on nostalgic attempts to rediscover great power status,' remark Hill and Lord in reference to Joseph Frankel's influential study of post-war Britain in 1975.<sup>629</sup> 'Now, UK foreign policy was at last taking a form more appropriate to a middle-ranking state whose interests were concentrated on its own immediate region of west Europe'.<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>625</sup> *Action not Words: The New Conservative Programme*. (London: Conservative and Unionist Central Office, 1966).

<sup>626</sup> *The New Conservative Programme* (1966).

<sup>627</sup> Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 21, 24; Holmes *Failure*, 5; Seldon 'Heath Government', 12; Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall*, revsd. ed. (London: Pimlico, 2001), 281.

<sup>628</sup> Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 28.

<sup>629</sup> Joseph Frankel *British Foreign Policy 1945–1973* (1975), cited by Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 287.

<sup>630</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 287.

At the same time as Britain's external arena contracted, there was no shortage of international conflicts erupting forth from its colonial past—including, of course, violence in East Pakistan and the Indo-Pakistani war. 'As the British Empire faded into history books, Heath was faced with intractable left-overs from the heritage of white British occupation and denial over centuries and decades of core human rights like self-governance,' reflects Denis MacShane.<sup>631</sup> 'These foreign problems provoked anger from the liberal-left in Britain but were not first-order priorities. For Heath there was only one international question that mattered: taking Britain in to Europe'.<sup>632</sup>

This widely held view of the Heath government may be valid considering the energy the administration expended on EEC entry and domestic renewal. Yet the assertion that 'Europe and modernisation were all that really mattered'<sup>633</sup> overlooks several of the Heath administration's early promises and international initiatives (including its activities during the East Pakistan crisis), which indicate that the government did not make as 'clean'<sup>634</sup> a break as supposed with internationalism. Rather, as contended here, the Heath government's renunciation of 'Pax Britannia' was 'untidy'<sup>635</sup> and transpired in a more uneven manner than is generally acknowledged.

Indeed, Britain's varied efforts to influence events on the subcontinent in 1971 act as a prime example of how the government were not blinkered in their focus on Europe and the domestic sphere, but rather sought to exert influence and cultivate British political, commercial and defence interests abroad. The fact that many of these initiatives rarely achieved their objectives, as soon became apparent, points not necessarily to a lack of will on the government's behalf, but rather to the constraints impinging upon British foreign policy that, at least in part, shaped the government's variegated approach towards the subcontinent in 1971.

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<sup>631</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 51.

<sup>632</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 74.

<sup>633</sup> Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 28.

<sup>634</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 287.

<sup>635</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 287.

***The government's international orientation***

While in opposition, Heath's Conservatives strongly disapproved of Harold Wilson's decision, taken in January 1968, to withdraw British forces from Southeast Asia and the Middle East, slashing Britain's international commitments 'East of Suez' (nineteenth century political parlance for the British Empire east of the Suez canal). The Tories were not the only ones to protest the act, which had been carried out in the context of Britain's severely declining manpower and resources, and exacerbated by the 1967 currency crisis and Arab oil embargo.<sup>636</sup> Many MPs, on both sides of the floor, agreed with Heath's protestation: "Never before has a British government exerted less influence on overseas affairs".<sup>637</sup>

Britain's presence in the region had been notoriously sensitive since 1956, when the Eden government and France militarily intervened against Egypt in the Suez region (having engineered an Israeli incursion as an alibi), only to be slapped down by the United States and forced to withdraw.<sup>638</sup> After the debacle, commonly described as a watershed in British history signalling the embarrassing end of Britain as a great power,<sup>639</sup> Britain accelerated decolonization, a process that had effectively begun with its withdrawal from India a decade earlier. With its self-image as 'global policeman'<sup>640</sup> battered, many during the Wilson era simply could not accept the decision to relinquish Britain's last source of international prestige. Thus Heath promised Parliament in 1966, "When the time comes...we shall ignore the time phasing laid down by the Prime

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<sup>636</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 289; Burke 'Anglo-American relations'; For Wilson's other motivations, see 'The Decision to Withdraw from East of Suez', Institute of Contemporary British History (ICBH) Witness Seminar held 16 November 1990 (London: ICBH, 2002).

<sup>637</sup> Quoted in Campbell *Heath: A Biography*, 227; Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 6.

<sup>638</sup> For discussion, see Neil Briscoe, *Britain and UN Peacekeeping 1948-67* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 38-56, and 'The Decision to Withdraw from East of Suez' (ICBH Witness Seminar).

<sup>639</sup> Peter Beck describes how Suez occupies an 'omnipresent place in contemporary political vocabulary', but questions whether it really was a 'seminal moment in Britain's history' in *Using History*, 8.

<sup>640</sup> Briscoe *Britain and UN Peacekeeping*, 38.

Minister and his Government for the Far East and the Middle East. We shall support our friends and allies and we shall restore the good name of Britain”.<sup>641</sup>

Heath also took pains to link European entry with enhancing Britain’s global status; his overtures to leaders on the continent were, he intimated, not an admission of Britain’s decline but rather a ‘diplomacy of manoeuvre’.<sup>642</sup> As Thomas Bridges (the PM’s future Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs) affirmed in 1970, “Mr. Heath does not regard British policy in Europe...as regionalism...it is the Government’s view that a joint effort with our partners in the E.E.C. is the best means we have of fulfilling a number of worldwide objectives”.<sup>643</sup> The new Prime Minister was, in other words, ‘quite as vociferous as his predecessors in rejecting the notion that Britain was merely a regional power, confined in its roles to its own corner of the world’.<sup>644</sup> His Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, supported him: the Conservatives “have always insisted...that British interests can be identified far beyond the horizons of Europe”, he declared at a party conference in October of 1970.<sup>645</sup> Indeed, according to his biographer, ‘Home always believed that Britain, present at the creation of the post-war world, should punch above its weight’.<sup>646</sup>

Policy papers commissioned by the government from 1970 to 1971 also reflect a dedication to international activity. The 1970 White Paper on defence, for one, ‘reaffirmed an “east of Suez” commitment’<sup>647</sup> and declared that the new administration’s objective was ‘to enable Britain to resume, within her resources, a

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<sup>641</sup> Quoted in Benvenuti ‘Southeast Asia’, 6.

<sup>642</sup> Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 286.

<sup>643</sup> Quoted in Benvenuti ‘Southeast Asia’, 20.

<sup>644</sup> Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 286.

<sup>645</sup> Quoted in Benvenuti ‘Southeast Asia’, 20.

<sup>646</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 410-411. Douglas Hurd first famously applied the boxing metaphor to British foreign policy in 1993.

<sup>647</sup> 27 October 1970 Command Paper 4521. Quoted in CAB 129/155. Draft ‘Statement on the Defence Estimates 1971: Note by the Secretary of State for Defence’, Ministry of Defence, 26 January 1971.

proper share of responsibility for the preservation of peace and stability in the world'.<sup>648</sup>

The 1971 Defence Paper reiterated this intention:

British interests and responsibilities do not lie exclusively within NATO. Britain's political and trading interests are world-wide and they can flourish only in stable conditions. She must also, therefore, be willing to play her part, though on a scale appropriate to her resources, in countering threats to stability outside Europe. For British territories overseas, and for those to whom Britain owes a special duty by treaty or otherwise, there is a direct responsibility to provide protection.<sup>649</sup>

Having forthrightly declared an intention to act overseas, the Conservatives rejected the controversial 1969 Duncan Committee Report on overseas representation, which maintained that Britain should limit itself to operations within Europe and the North Atlantic—its appropriate “area of concentration”.<sup>650</sup> They openly expressed ‘important reservations about the Committee’s recommendations, in particular the distinction drawn between the so-called area of concentration and the “outer-area”—a concept which it rejects’.<sup>651</sup> The report clearly proposed a ‘retrenchment which many felt profoundly misguided. It was shelved after the general election’.<sup>652</sup>

Government policy papers and Heath’s open criticism of Labour’s retrenchment in the late 1960s certainly imply that the Conservatives, at least at the start of their tenure, intended Britain to play a visible role in upholding international peace and security outside of Europe. When violence erupted in Pakistan in 1971, it was not inconceivable that Britain, as a supplement to their efforts in diplomacy and aid, might have considered taking stronger action (perhaps by publicly acknowledging the existence of state atrocities against civilians, in addition to civil war, or by urging for a multilateral approach through the UN). However, Heath’s overseas ventures on the whole turned out to be quite constricted. Confronted by a barrage of domestic and

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<sup>648</sup> CAB 129/155. Draft Statement on the Defence Estimates 1971.

<sup>649</sup> ‘Government White Paper: Statement on the Defence Estimates, Cmnd. 4592, 23 February 1971’ in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 131-143.

<sup>650</sup> *Report of the Review Committee on Overseas Representation 1968-1969*, Chairman Sir Val Duncan (London: HMSO, 1969), quoted in Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 286.

<sup>651</sup> UKNA: FCO 79/195 entitled ‘Briefing of New Administration on Duncan Report’. Letter ‘The Duncan Report’, FCO—10 Downing Street, 20 June 1970.

<sup>652</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 407.

international impediments, the government—despite its stated intentions—was simply unable to influence events beyond Europe and the Atlantic to anywhere near the extent to which Britain was previously accustomed. Hence according to Hill and Lord, ‘Much of the first half of the Heath government was...taken up with managing a graceful retreat from its early promises in matters of foreign policy’.<sup>653</sup> While this state of affairs may be said to reflect poorly on the government—accused as it frequently has been of ‘U-turning’ both on ideological and practical matters, it in fact speaks more pointedly to Britain’s limited material capabilities following decolonization, and establishes that by the time of the East Pakistan crisis, Britain had effectively become a second-rank power whose international initiatives were necessarily going to be circumscribed—although not altogether terminated.

*The government’s ‘non-Europe’ foreign policy*<sup>654</sup>

During the summer of 1971, the Conservatives strove to fulfil their promise to reverse Labour’s withdrawals from Southeast Asia by negotiating a Five Power Commonwealth Defence Agreement (FPDA) with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, committing Britain militarily to continue defending the region. According to Heath’s Minister of Defence, Peter Carrington, ‘The Five Power Pact was a signal that we in Britain had not shrunk to sole and solitary preoccupation with our own home concerns and domestic security, and I think it was worth negotiating’.<sup>655</sup> The pact, in essence, embodied what was originally intended for the Commonwealth association, namely a strategic kinship, capable of protecting the regional security interests of its members.

The FPDA, however, turned out to be primarily a political and consultative accord after Heath was forced to acknowledge it could not maintain anything but a

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<sup>653</sup> Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 289.

<sup>654</sup> The chapter in Heath’s *Autobiography* detailing his initiatives beyond the EEC is entitled, ‘The World Stage: Foreign Policy (Non-Europe) 1970-1974’.

<sup>655</sup> Carrington *Reflect*, 210-220.

token force in the region—90% of its defence budget had already been spent on Western Europe, while the crisis in Northern Ireland had absorbed 6 troop battalions.<sup>656</sup> To worsen matters, the *Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities* compiled each year by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, demonstrated that the percentage of Britain's GNP spent on defence from the 1960s was rapidly declining and its manpower between 1951 and 1971 fell far behind that of other powers.<sup>657</sup> Simply put, 'the Heath government had little more to offer'.<sup>658</sup> Strengthening the North Atlantic alliance and reinvigorating the British economy, while retaining an influence East of Suez, was as ambitious as it was impractical. Thus, while Heath was 'eager'<sup>659</sup> to hail the FPDA as proof that Britain still held sway outside of Europe, he ended up doing essentially what the previous government had planned, and shifted Britain from being the Far East's 'main provider of security' to a mere 'facilitator'.<sup>660</sup>

The Conservatives also intended to reverse Labour's withdrawals from the Gulf and continue providing protection to several small states there. However, as in the Far East, the Defence Ministry quickly realised that the cost and complexity of such a role outstripped its capacities. Meanwhile, the states in question, disenchanted with shifting British security guarantees, were anxious to begin their own rearmament program.<sup>661</sup> Heath, however fervently he tried to convince Gulf leaders to accept a limited British presence, found the policy was irreversible—'They all responded in the same terms. They were very sorry, but all of their plans for the future were now based on the

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<sup>656</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 131-143.

<sup>657</sup> 'Britain', *The Military Balance: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1971), 15-16; 'Defence Expenditure and National Economies' from 1968-1971 and 'Comparative Defence Expenditure, Gross National Product and Manpower Figures 1951-1971', *The Military Balance: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1972), 70, 73-74.

<sup>658</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 303.

<sup>659</sup> Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 5.

<sup>660</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 290, 291.

<sup>661</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 291.

assumption that Britain would be withdrawing'.<sup>662</sup> Unable to negotiate a 'penny-packet commitment' like that in the Far East, the government exchanged 'its intended role from security provider to external federator'.<sup>663</sup>

Britain's inability to retain a foothold in the region is significant considering 'the Middle East filled Heath with foreboding'<sup>664</sup> throughout his premiership. Just months after assuming office, in September 1970, Heath faced his first international emergency when members of the Palestine Liberation Organization hijacked five aircraft. One of them landed in London, bringing the Middle East conflict uncomfortably close to home. What is more, the British constantly feared that Arab states would cut off Western oil supplies, as they had during the Six Day War (5-10 June 1967)—'a recent memory' for all in government.<sup>665</sup> Given these anxieties, it is not surprising that the Middle East was high on Western Europe's political agenda. Britain's withdrawals at such a time illustrate its shrinking capacity to maintain influence in those regions it considered most important, as well as the manner in which external circumstances complicated its overseas ambitions.

Quite apart from its concerns in the Middle and Far East, the Conservative government was also determined to settle with Ian Smith's minority white government in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), which, in 1965, had unilaterally declared independence from Britain. Douglas-Home, for his part, firmly believed that Harold Wilson's declaration of "no independence before majority rule"<sup>666</sup> had been a "terrible mistake".<sup>667</sup> Indeed, both the Prime Minister and Home agreed that resolving 'one of the last of the great colonial problems' was a 'high priority'.<sup>668</sup> The incentives to settle, it would seem, were many: British sanctions in place since 1965

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<sup>662</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 482.

<sup>663</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 291.

<sup>664</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 301.

<sup>665</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 412.

<sup>666</sup> Wilson quoted in Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 296.

<sup>667</sup> Douglas-Home quoted in Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 296.

<sup>668</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 420.



were having little effect on the Rhodesian economy, and they were unpopular with many Conservatives just when Heath needed party unity to negotiate European entry. The use of force was not an option, moreover, as Britain had long ago reduced its military presence in the area.<sup>669</sup> British officials thus intently sought to negotiate with Smith bilaterally (the Commonwealth was not considered to be a viable forum of mediation, particularly as the issue had ignited considerable controversy amongst its members<sup>670</sup>), and although an agreement was almost reached in November 1971, the issue remained unresolved until 1979-1980 under Margaret Thatcher's premiership.

Of course, Britain's chief non-European foreign policy concern of the era, like that of other Western powers, was the Soviet Union. 'Western security,' the 1971 Defence Paper stressed, 'remains under the shadow of the present and potential threat of the vast military resources of the Soviet Union'.<sup>671</sup> Hence internal documents such as the 1970 government 'War Book', a chilling series of secret 'transition-to-war' exercises in the event that a Soviet nuclear attack precipitated World War Three.<sup>672</sup> Nuclear warfare was not the government's only preoccupation with regards to the Eastern bloc. In 1971, Britain's internal security intelligence agency, MI5, discovered industrial spies were posing as staff at the Soviet Embassy in London. Rarely had national security been under such a direct threat, and the Soviet agents were expelled in September 1971. According to Heath, 'The expulsion of 105 spies was the most important security action ever taken by any Western government' at the time.<sup>673</sup> For Douglas-Home, the spy incident was 'one of the most important episodes of his second spell at the Foreign office'.<sup>674</sup>

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<sup>669</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 294-295.

<sup>670</sup> See Ashton 'Commonwealth, 1964-71', 73-94.

<sup>671</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 131-143.

<sup>672</sup> UKNA: Cabinet 134/2880 entitled 'Home Defence Committee: War Book Subcommittee 1970'; Peter Hennessy, ' "Inescapable, necessary and lunatic": Whitehall's Transition-to-war Planning for World War III', lecture delivered at *Britain and the Cold War: 23<sup>rd</sup> Summer Conference of the Centre for Contemporary British History* at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 23 June 2009.

<sup>673</sup> Heath *Autobiography*, 476.

<sup>674</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 415.

East-West relations, of course, were not exclusively antagonistic. This was the era of *détente*, when Western governments including Britain, recognized that their national security interests could also be enhanced by dialogue with the Soviet bloc. As the Defence Ministry declared:

Western policies must...be based on the twin concepts of defence and détente. The military strength of the Alliance must be maintained at levels sufficient to deter aggression, whatever form it may take, at the same time as the Western countries are seeking to engage the Soviet Union and her allies in discussions which could lead to a real and lasting relaxation of tensions between East and West.<sup>675</sup>

Concerned as the government may have been, however, this aspect of Britain's foreign policy should not be overemphasized. For whatever Heath officials declared, they did little to open dialogue with the USSR, unlike other post-war Conservative administrations; nor did they emulate West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Neue Ostpolitik* (postulating 'change through rapprochement') and try to achieve *détente* with Eastern European countries on an individual basis. On the contrary, Heath believed a reopening of relations must be achieved multilaterally, or risk 'competitive *détente*' between Western powers, each 'out-bid[ding] one another in the concessions they were prepared to make to the Soviet Union'.<sup>676</sup> Yet, his government did not promote any concrete multilateral approaches either.

For some observers, it is unclear why the administration's feeble efforts at *détente* were so 'strangely under-developed'.<sup>677</sup> Seen in perspective, they appear to fit a pattern in which the government's initiatives in the Middle East, the Far East and Africa, whatever the underlying intention, ended in compromise. Britain's courses of action during the crisis in East Pakistan were arguably more successful, despite their being formulated within the same context, in which the government's international aims were consistently tempered by external and internal constraints.

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<sup>675</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 131-143; underline in original.

<sup>676</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 309.

<sup>677</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 309; Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 15.

*Domestic disarray*

As Heath's non-European ventures displayed increasing frailty, at home, he was assailed by troubles. EEC entry had created major divisions within the Conservative party, with numerous backbench dissenters questioning whether the incentives for entry were truly sufficient, or whether Heath was simply 'desperate to join the EC at any price'.<sup>678</sup> Indeed, in early 1971—just six months after taking power—public support for the Conservatives dropped below 20%, as Labour steadily overtook them in opinion polls.<sup>679</sup>

Britain in the 1970s, moreover, was fraught with race tensions following the waves of immigration in the previous two decades from Commonwealth states—with the highest ratio of immigrants, by far, having been born on the Indian subcontinent.<sup>680</sup> This had fundamentally altered the complexion of many British urban areas, posing a challenge to the original residents who now 'had to share space, housing, and welfare benefits with new people who had different languages, religions, cultures and behaviour patterns', often unwillingly.<sup>681</sup> Such was the context for Enoch Powell's infamous 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968,<sup>682</sup> which sparked a series of heated debates over the issue of immigration in public and parliament, and ultimately led to his ejection from Heath's shadow cabinet. These debates continued well into Heath's premiership, absorbing a good part of the government's attention, and resulted in the Immigration Act of 1971 (enacted in 1973) that did indeed contain tighter controls on 'new

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<sup>678</sup> Holmes *Failure*, xvi.

<sup>679</sup> Seldon 'Heath Government', 4; Ball 'Chronology', 394.

<sup>680</sup> Rendall and Salt's chapter on 'The foreign-born population' in *Focus on People and Migration* provides a detailed overview and analysis of immigration trends between 1951 and 2001 (UK Office for National Statistics, 2005). See especially Table 8.2. 'Countries of birth of the foreign-born population in 1971 and in 2001', 134.

<sup>681</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 62.

<sup>682</sup> "We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population," declared Powell to a Conservative Party meeting in Birmingham on 20 April 1968. "It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre....as I look ahead I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'." Enoch Powell, as quoted in *The Telegraph* (London), 6 November 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643826/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> (last accessed 20 April 2012).

Commonwealth' naturalisation.<sup>683</sup> During the East Pakistan crisis, there is no evidence on record that the Powellites or any other parliamentarians who opposed large-scale Commonwealth immigration sought to exert pressure on the government, fearing perhaps, that the crisis would cause a massive influx of refugees into Britain. Likewise, those on different parts of the political spectrum, such as backbench Empire Tories, the British Indian Chamber of Commerce or members of the All Parliamentary Indo-British group, did not openly appear to have made demands on HMG to refrain, for example, from condemning India's recourse to force. This may have been because Britain's position was from the outset to avoid direct involvement—a position that would likely have satisfied each group, notwithstanding their diverse political sympathies.

Further complicating domestic affairs, was the fact that trade unions were at the height of their power, and Heath was soon beset by a succession of strikes in different industries over rising unemployment and wage inflation.<sup>684</sup> Between late 1970 and mid-1971, Heath and his advisors set about devising a new industrial bill, aimed at reducing unofficial strikes. The highly unpopular Industrial Relations Act was passed in the summer of 1971, by which time Heath had already called two states of emergency.<sup>685</sup> Indeed, during his short three and half years as Prime Minister, Heath called a total of five states of emergency out of 'only twelve since governments were given this weapon by the Emergency Powers Act of 1920'.<sup>686</sup> Given the domestic struggles that the government had to contend with, its activities with regards to the East Pakistan crisis thus appear all the more notable.

Then there was Northern Ireland, where violence and political unrest between Protestants and minority Catholics had been on the rise since the previous decade. In

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<sup>683</sup> Nicholas Hillman examines the effects that Powell's speech may have had on contemporary and later British legislation in 'A "chorus of execration"? Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" forty years on', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2008): 83-104.

<sup>684</sup> Seldon 'Heath Government', 11-12; MacShane *Heath*, 96.

<sup>685</sup> Ramsden 'Prime Minister', 31.

<sup>686</sup> Seldon 'Heath Government', 8; Dominic Sandbrook describes these in monumental detail in *State of Emergency – The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

1969, Protestant police and militia had opened fire in Catholic ghettos. 'For the dormant Irish Republican Army,' states Denis MacShane, '...it was a rebirth and validation of violence against the British' and the pro-British Protestant government.<sup>687</sup>

By the beginning of 1971, 174 had died in the violence. In August, Heath responded by interning suspected terrorists without due process.

The internment was a disaster. Like a throwback to the 1930s or events in some British colony, the world watched with consternation as camps were opened to take the sleepy, bewildered, often quite elderly men....Some were terrorist organisers. Most, if not all, active IRA leaders and gunmen slipped across the border to Ireland. The lists provided by the provinces' intelligence services were badly out-of-date.<sup>688</sup>

Burdened with its own issues of separatist conflict in 1971, it is possible that the Heath government had little desire to speak out about those in other countries, including Pakistan. The two were not explicitly compared by government officials, although they were in West Pakistan, where the British High Commissioner reported, 'the equation of Ulster with East Pakistan' meant that the British were occasional objects 'of the hatred, ridicule and contempt of the press'.<sup>689</sup> While London chose not to comment on this equation, one wonders whether the issue of Northern Ireland may have fallen into the category of the 'elephant in the room'—the decisive affair that was at the forefront of official thinking, and which formed the background (even subconsciously) to the government's reluctance to express an opinion on secessionist crises abroad.<sup>690</sup> Whatever the case may be, if according to MacShane, 'Heath headed a government that could not maintain peace, let alone democratic law and order in a corner of Europe',<sup>691</sup> it is understandable that their efforts to do so elsewhere were, at best, restrained.

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<sup>687</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 112.

<sup>688</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 113. For a more sympathetic treatment of Heath's policies on Northern Ireland, see Paul Arthur, 'The Heath Government and Northern Ireland' in *1970-1974: A Reappraisal*, 235-238.

<sup>689</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter 'First Impressions of Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 21 September 1971.

<sup>690</sup> Richard Pilkington similarly refers to the subconscious influence that the issue of Quebec separatism may have exercised upon Canada's foreign policy in 'Canada and the East Pakistan crisis', 467.

<sup>691</sup> MacShane *Heath*, 114.

***Britain as a second rank military power***

The Heath government's modest, and in some cases, abortive international efforts, rendered all the more unachievable in light of domestic crises, illustrate how British foreign policy of the era was indeed somewhat 'untidy',<sup>692</sup> reflecting elements of initiative and retreat. Britain's restricted defence profile under Heath, as it were, contrasts starkly with the intense period of military activity between 1949 and 1970, when successive British governments—both Labour and Conservative—intervened unilaterally across the globe and took part in a series of UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>693</sup> Indeed, according to Neil Briscoe, the British military played a pioneering role in such operations, a majority of which were initiated to manage crises in former colonies. Peacekeeping as a form of conflict mediation, he suggests, at least in its early stages, was directly related to the former imperial power's 'process of decolonization..., post-colonial spasms...or post-colonial commitments'.<sup>694</sup> So Brian Urquhart, Britain's long-serving official at the UN and Assistant Secretary General in 1972, observed: "Britain was, albeit unwittingly, the parent of United Nations peacekeeping".<sup>695</sup>

This vigorous military record gives a rather misleading impression of a state with relatively undiminished power and resources. 'The United Kingdom intervened abroad with military force more than thirty times in the quarter century following World War II,' recall John Van Wingen and Herbert Tillema.<sup>696</sup> 'She used arms in more than twenty countries in nearly every world region. Britain turned to force more often than any other major nation....[and] intervened in more places than any other state'.<sup>697</sup> Yet, the authors contend, it is evident that this flurry of activity occurred within a set of clearly prescribed circumstances—namely, when the British were requested by

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<sup>692</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 287.

<sup>693</sup> For a list of these, see Ovendale *British Defence*, 6-9, and John Van Wingen and Herbert K. Tillema, 'British Military Intervention after World War II: Militance in a Second-Rank Power', *Journal of Peace Research* vol. XVII, no. 4 (1980): 291-303.

<sup>694</sup> Briscoe *Britain and UN Peacekeeping*, 1.

<sup>695</sup> Quoted in Briscoe *Britain and UN Peacekeeping*, 235.

<sup>696</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 291.

<sup>697</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 291.

authorities (in colonies or ex-colonies) to quell internal violence and a British military base was nearby. 'Military action,' moreover, 'nearly always supported that constituted authority'.<sup>698</sup> Thus the factors of request, violence, imperial links and military proximity (or time, place and circumstance) were almost always present—'Among reluctant warriors, specific circumstances may be necessary for intervention'.<sup>699</sup>

Britain's post-war interventions were therefore not necessarily related to protecting or pursuing national interests, as is normally the case in great power campaigns; it did not *choose* to intervene, but was compelled to do so on select occasions when threats to regional stability (usually in the form of local insurgency) endangered their overseas interests (as in for example, the Nigerian civil war but not in East Pakistan). Briscoe concurs that it was Britain's decline, not capabilities nor even political will, which 'predisposed it to peacekeeping as a mechanism for managing limited conflict at a minimal cost rather than a conversion to international communitarianism'.<sup>700</sup> In other words, Britain's frequent recourse to force during the era of decolonization was not an anachronistic throwback to the imperialist age, as it may appear, but in fact, confirmation of its secondary post-war status. 'Where, when, and why Britain intervened reveal that she used force to cope and not to conquer....Military force was one of the instruments of statecraft Britain used to manage orderly decline. Once the Empire was gone she no longer had frequent reason to use this tool'.<sup>701</sup> Indeed, it would seem that after the Heath government negotiated Britain's entry into the European Community, 'the era of frequent military intervention ended'.<sup>702</sup> Meanwhile, the objective fact of Britain's second-rank capabilities combined with a basic desire to remain active overseas, continued to condition the government's shifting responses to international affairs.

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<sup>698</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 295.

<sup>699</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 295.

<sup>700</sup> Briscoe *UN Peacekeeping*, 226, 234.

<sup>701</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 300.

<sup>702</sup> Van Wingen and Tillema 'British Military Intervention', 293.

***Summary: the Heath Government's foreign policy concerns and constraints***

In 1970, upon taking office, Heath announced the beginning of a 'new era in British diplomacy which would leave behind years of retreat'.<sup>703</sup> In 1971, Britain declared it had 'a direct responsibility to provide protection' outside of Europe to those it 'owes a special duty'.<sup>704</sup> At first glance, such statements could conceivably have meant taking a stronger position on state terror in East Pakistan—a political entity created by Britain. However, as events show, they did not. When the government referred to 'outside Europe',<sup>705</sup> they intended small parts of Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia; the Indian subcontinent did not feature in these pronouncements. Moreover, Heath's seemingly earnest yet ultimately feeble initiatives in the aforesaid regions were overshadowed by the energy he and his government expended throughout 1970 and 1971 on their twin goals of entering Europe and modernizing Britain.

In consequence, the administration's promise to uphold Britain's reputation as an international power, as some scholars argue, may have partly been false rhetoric to carve out an ideological position different to that of Labour's and appease those who were apprehensive about 'excessive Europeanisation' during Heath's premiership.<sup>706</sup> Heath's internationalist declarations, in other words, may well have been a political tool to appease the Eurosceptic elements of the Conservative party and the British public—the government was, without doubt, 'careful not to cast Britain's post-imperial future in purely European terms'.<sup>707</sup> Still, their various efforts to influence the crisis in East Pakistan, measured though they were, indicate that this was not entirely the case. As Simon Smith accurately observes:

The Heath government's approach to developments in South Asia...demonstrates that despite shift to Europe, Britain in the early 1970s still possessed substantial interests in the non-European world which could not be ignored. Indeed, the seriousness with which

<sup>703</sup> Heath's first speech as PM to the Conservative Party Conference, 10 October 1970. Quoted in Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 286.

<sup>704</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 131-143.

<sup>705</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*.

<sup>706</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 289; Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 20.

<sup>707</sup> Benvenuti 'Southeast Asia', 5.



the British government took the crisis, and the close involvement of its key members, including the Prime Minister himself, served to underline this point.<sup>708</sup>

Heath's professed international orientation was thus likely genuine, at least in part. Rather than an absence of will, it appears that it was Britain's reduced economic and military capacity, as well as the multiple international and domestic crises that confronted the government upon taking office, that definitively foiled any intentions the Heath administration may have had of 'resum[ing]...a proper share of responsibility for the preservation of peace and stability in the world'.<sup>709</sup>

The early 1970s was most certainly a 'turning point in Britain's international position'—'a time of movement';<sup>710</sup> a period of 'immense change in Britain's entire world position'.<sup>711</sup> Britain's domestic situation, in the interim, was in striking disarray. Indeed, 'no government since 1945 has been in office at such an awkward time';<sup>712</sup> Heath was in a 'pressure-cooker situation'; 'overwhelmed by one damn problem after another—industrial relations, inflation, immigration, and Northern Ireland'.<sup>713</sup> As Patrick Bell concludes, 'Heath proved an unlucky Prime Minister'.<sup>714</sup>

The Conservative government was thus consigned to uphold its predecessor's legacy, and continue downscaling Britain's international responsibilities. They may have 'shelved'<sup>715</sup> the Duncan Report and its recommendations for downsizing, however the report's conclusion that Britain was a power in decline could not be as easily dismissed. The Heath government was effectively confined by the reality that Britain, unable to retain Suez fifteen years earlier, by the 1970s, could no longer viably remain East of it. From F.S. Northedge's perspective in 1974, it appeared that "it was at this point that British governments found that there really was nowhere else to go except

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<sup>708</sup> Smith 'Britain and the South Asia Crisis', 451-452.

<sup>709</sup> Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*.

<sup>710</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 285, 286.

<sup>711</sup> Northedge *Descent from Power*, 236.

<sup>712</sup> Seldon 'Heath Government', 19.

<sup>713</sup> Arthur 'Northern Ireland', 236, 258.

<sup>714</sup> Bell *Labour*, 55.

<sup>715</sup> Thorpe *Douglas-Home*, 407.

into the Europe of the six”.<sup>716</sup> True as that may be, this did not prevent the government on occasion from actively seeking to protect Britain’s international interests within its circumscribed means, including those on the Indian subcontinent.

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<sup>716</sup> Northedge as quoted in Hill and Lord ‘Foreign Policy’, 287.

## ii. 1947-1971: ANGLO-PAKISTANI & ANGLO-INDIAN RELATIONS

*'For the last twenty-five years the British people have been adjusting themselves to a new role in world affairs. The record of the British Empire was one of which we could justifiably be proud. But it is now a matter of history. We have almost entirely divested ourselves of our former imperial responsibilities'.*

— Edward Heath, 5 April 1971<sup>717</sup>

Britain's varied responses to violence in East Pakistan in 1971 (and, it would seem, to foreign affairs in general) were indirectly conditioned by the Heath government's focus on Europe, by national economic and political crises, and generally, by the country's steady transformation into a secondary power, as evident by its diminished military capabilities and restricted overseas initiatives. Yet without doubt, this transformation was well underway before the Heath era, having manifested itself with the loss of India when the British reluctantly agreed to withdraw and partition the subcontinent. Following Indian independence, Britain retained relations with the successor states that waxed or waned depending on circumstances and leadership. Many of the elements characterising the post-independence phase were the precursors of British responses to the East Pakistan crisis, and will thus be described here, ending with a detailed analysis of Anglo-Pakistani and Anglo-Indian relations in 1971 that points to an overall coherency in Britain's post-war foreign policy towards South Asia.

### ***1947: Indian Independence***

The British East India Company ruled the Indian subcontinent unofficially from 1757 to 1858, after which the British Crown governed directly until 1947—the year in which the British finally 'quit India'.<sup>718</sup> It seems they had little choice—two World Wars and decades of struggle by Indians for independence had placed a strain on Britain's resources that it could no longer sustain. As their last act, British officials partitioned

<sup>717</sup> 'Speech by Mr. Edward Heath, Bonn, 5 April 1971,' in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 231-234.

<sup>718</sup> The Indian National Congress Party had launched a 'brutally smothered "Quit India" campaign' five years earlier (Stanley Wolpert, *Shameful Flight: the Last Years of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9).

the subcontinent according to the ‘two nation theory’ that religion determined identity *and* borders; at midnight, on 15 August 1947, ‘Hindu’ India and ‘Muslim’ Pakistan came into being.

The resulting violence was unprecedented: over ten million abandoned their dwellings in a desperate attempt to reach the designated new homeland; hundreds of thousands never arrived, many falling victim to vicious atrocities perpetrated by rival communal groups. Death toll figures range from 200,000 to as many as 1.5 million,<sup>719</sup> although as Paul Brass notes, ‘sources that are most likely closer to the truth...range between 200,000 and 360,000 dead’.<sup>720</sup> The tragedy of partition has rendered it, to many, less a political event than a ‘fratricidal sundering of a country’<sup>721</sup>—a ‘holocaust of pain, looting, rape, and murder’.<sup>722</sup>

In brief, the debate over why India was partitioned pits those who believe division was an inevitable result of an ideological impasse between Hindus and Muslims—the ‘essential difference thesis’—against those who argue that precipitating political and social factors fostered a contrived, rather than intrinsic, sense of division.<sup>723</sup> The ‘contrived’ argument typically indicts Britain. Some contend that the British Raj<sup>724</sup> employed ‘divide and rule’ policies to stir Hindu-Muslim rivalry and prevent unified opposition to colonial rule.<sup>725</sup> Others argue that sectarian provincial politics in the 1930s and 1940s in addition to the high politics of British authorities and Indian leaders generated the communal tension that manifested itself so murderously after independence. Hindu and Muslim class rivalries driven by fear of ‘the other’

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<sup>719</sup> See, for example, Butalia *The Other Side*, 3; Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 352; Ali *Understanding Bangladesh*, 11.

<sup>720</sup> Brass ‘Retributive Genocide’, 75.

<sup>721</sup> Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998) 4.

<sup>722</sup> Wolpert *A New History*, 352.

<sup>723</sup> Mookherjee cites the debate’s main proponents in ‘A lot of History’ (Ph.D diss.), 44-45. See also Chatterji ‘New Directions in Partition Studies’, 213-220, and Brass ‘Retributive Genocide’, 73.

<sup>724</sup> Sanskrit for ‘King’ or ‘Rule’.

<sup>725</sup> Anisuzzaman, for example, contends that in Bengal, the ‘provision of separate electorates for the Hindus and Muslims, introduced by the British colonial administration in 1909, only paved the way for the demand of a separate homeland by the Muslims’ (‘The Identity Question’, 50).

dominating in an independent India and alluring opportunities to seize (or retain) bureaucratic postings, land and seats of power are considered to have both complemented and fuelled these narratives of power politics.<sup>726</sup>

Yet it would seem that the British, while having exacerbated communal cleavages during their rule, did not willingly partition India. Before and after World War II, officials tried to convince regional politicians to coexist in a single federation, seen as vital to future British defence considerations.<sup>727</sup> By 1947, as each effort failed, 'preoccupied as they were with Britain's own growing post-war domestic problems and diminishing resources, Labour's cabinet all but lost interest in India's problems'.<sup>728</sup> The British finally (and reluctantly) accepted partition when it appeared that their own representatives and Muslim and Hindu political leaders in the region were never likely to agree on fundamental questions, such as how power would be shared in a united Indian federation and minority rights could be protected.<sup>729</sup> Britain is not, therefore, the sole architect of India and Pakistan's making, as often alleged.

Narendra Singh Sarila, a prominent Indian diplomat during the era, argues otherwise in *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*.<sup>730</sup> According to Singh, British officials consciously employed religion to partition India and create Pakistan, a pro-West state, from where Britain could defend its regional interests against the USSR. What the author dubs as Britain's 'Pakistan Strategy'<sup>731</sup> emerged in 1945 when, following India's indication that it would control its own foreign policy, Clement Atlee's Labour Party 'swung around to support the partition of

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<sup>726</sup> Mookherjee 'Public Memory & the Bangladesh Liberation War' (Ph.D. diss.), 45; Feldman 'The Liberation War Museum', 10; Chapman *Geopolitics of South Asia*, 206.

<sup>727</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 10; Brass 'Retributive Genocide', 73-74; Anita Inder Singh, *The Limits of British Influence: South Asia and the Anglo-American Relationship, 1947-56* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 226-227; Naseem Farooq Bajwa, *Pakistan and the West: the First Decade, 1947-1957* (Karachi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>728</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 10.

<sup>729</sup> Arun Kumar Banerji, *India and Britain, 1947-68: the Evolution of Post-colonial Relations* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1977), 22-23.

<sup>730</sup> Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*. (London: Constable, 2006).

<sup>731</sup> Singh Sarila *Shadow of the Great Game*, 402.

India basically to ensure the defence of Britain's vital interests after the war'.<sup>732</sup> Even if the British did view partition as a geopolitical stratagem, the idea that they masterminded events is unconvincing and diminishes the influence of other contributing factors, particularly the role of regional authorities who, some argue, eagerly took advantage of the growing divisions to consolidate political support.<sup>733</sup> Theses that vigorously support the 'contrived' explanation of India's partition are, as historian Philip Ziegler says of Singh's work, 'thoughtful, interesting, if essentially wrong-headed'.<sup>734</sup>

Yet, for all this, it is true that the British did not properly execute their final duties on the subcontinent: they left too quickly, with little regard for the safety of their former subjects. Peter Carrington, Britain's Defence Secretary in 1971, recalls the emotional February 1947 House of Lords debate on the Indian Independence Bill: many felt the date fixed for independence was 'terrifyingly early in view of the state of India and the threat of violence and chaos'.<sup>735</sup> Lord Halifax's verdict helped to assuage dissension: "The truth is that for India today there is no solution that is not fraught with the gravest dangers. And the conclusion I reach is that I am not prepared to condemn what His Majesty's Government are doing unless I can honestly and confidently recommend a better solution".<sup>736</sup> It was, concludes Carrington, 'immensely effective on all who heard it....The Government Bill passed'.<sup>737</sup>

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<sup>732</sup> Singh Sarila *Shadow of the Great Game*, 29.

<sup>733</sup> See, for example Wolpert *Shameful Flight* and Brass 'Retributive Genocide'.

<sup>734</sup> Philip Ziegler, 'Not so duplicitous as painted: The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition', Review of *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*, by Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Spectator Magazine* (21 September 2006), [http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/25320/part\\_3/not-so-duplicitous-as-painted.shtml](http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/25320/part_3/not-so-duplicitous-as-painted.shtml) (last accessed 17 July 2009).

<sup>735</sup> Carrington *Reflect*, 80.

<sup>736</sup> Lord Halifax, as quoted in Carrington *Reflect*, 80.

<sup>737</sup> Carrington *Reflect*, 80.

Britain's "shameful flight, by a premature hurried scuttle"<sup>738</sup> from India took place only ten weeks after the last viceroy, Louis Mountbatten, was appointed in mid-1947. The Attlee Cabinet had given him until June 1948—one year—to withdraw Britain's 'air and fleet cover, as well as the shield of British troops and arms, from South Asia's 400 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs'.<sup>739</sup> Yet an impatient Mountbatten, declares historian Stanley Wolpert, contracted this already narrow time frame into a matter of weeks and almost single-handedly botched the undertaking.<sup>740</sup>

Wolpert does not hold Mountbatten's 'hyperactive frenzy' wholly responsible for the violence at partition: World War II, personal ambitions, domestic concerns, and ignorance played their part in 'a combination of historic causes that contributed to that tragic error of judgement, only the most immediate of which was Mountbatten's incompetence'.<sup>741</sup> Brass agrees that partition 'was a consequence of a long list of both deliberate actions and failures to compromise on the part of the three principle parties who created the political present of India and Pakistan'.<sup>742</sup> Recent scholarship, which incorporates both the high politics of Indian and British officials and the experiences of ordinary individuals, takes this line of argument even further:

The events of 1947...were neither foreseen nor intended by anyone. India and Pakistan were the accidental products of rapidly shifting contingencies, whether in the high and provincial politics or in the complex grassroots of the subcontinent....No one—no leaders or civil servants, viceroys or chiefs of staff, and certainly not the general public—had any inkling of what partition would entail.<sup>743</sup>

India and Pakistan, one might say, were 'insufficiently imagined'.<sup>744</sup> (And, as Philip Oldenburg adds, the eventual rupture of Pakistan itself may have been all but inevitable:

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<sup>738</sup> Winston Churchill to Clement Attlee during Parliament's first debate on the Indian Independence Bill (quoted in Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 9).

<sup>739</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 1.

<sup>740</sup> Apparently, Mountbatten himself admitted he "fucked it up" to BBC's John Osman in 1965 during the second Indo-Pakistani war (quoted in Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 2).

<sup>741</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 9.

<sup>742</sup> Brass 'Retributive Genocide', 76.

<sup>743</sup> Chatterji 'New Directions in Partition Studies', 215.

<sup>744</sup> "Pakistan, the peeling, fragmenting palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, may be described as a failure of the dreaming mind....[P]erhaps the place was just *insufficiently imagined*, a picture full of irreconcilable elements...a miracle that went wrong" (Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (1983), as quoted in Oldenburg 'Insufficiently Imagined', 711; emphasis added by Oldenburg).

East and West Pakistanis did not spend enough time merging their visions of Pakistan before its creation to imagine how the state would function in reality.<sup>745</sup>)

‘In one month the accumulated possessions of centuries of imperial hoarding, building, and creating were torn apart, severed as though by caesarean section to permit the two new nations to be born,’ laments Wolpert.<sup>746</sup> ‘The hastily and ineptly drawn lines of partition of North India’s two greatest provinces, Pakistan and Bengal, slashed through their multicultural heartlands...drawn by an English jurist who had never set foot on the soil of either province’.<sup>747</sup> ‘[It was] a division,’ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin note, ‘that was remarkable for having been decided almost in the blink of an eye’.<sup>748</sup> The ‘butchered boundary lines’ cutting into Punjab and Bengal were kept ‘under lock and key on Mountbatten’s orders, hidden from any other eyes’ until after India’s Independence Day festivities were over.<sup>749</sup> Governors of both regions had no idea what to expect; no time was spent planning for feeding, housing, and medical needs of refugees; no British troops were left to maintain stability. ‘What a glorious charade of British imperial largesse and power “peacefully” transferred’.<sup>750</sup>

### ***Post 1947: erratic bilateral relations / India tilt***

Britain’s abrupt departure from its Indian Empire did not mean immediate disengagement from the region. Indeed, Britain retained close ties with India and Pakistan following independence, and both chose to join the Commonwealth to nourish political, cultural, commercial and military links with the former colonial authority.

‘Ironically,’ notes historian Naseem Bajwa in *Pakistan and the West: The First Decade*,

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<sup>745</sup> Oldenburg ‘Insufficiently Imagined’, 711. For an analysis of this perspective see, William B. Milam (former U.S. ambassador to Bangladesh (1990-1993) and Pakistan (1998-2001)), ‘The “What If” Category of History: The Inherited Disunity of United Pakistan—An Inevitable Separation?’, *Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia*, ADST-DACOR Diplomats and Diplomacy Series (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 20-24.

<sup>746</sup> Wolpert *A New History*, 352.

<sup>747</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 1.

<sup>748</sup> Menon and Bhasin, with reference to Mushirul Hasan, in *Borders*, 3-4.

<sup>749</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 11.

<sup>750</sup> Wolpert *Shameful Flight*, 11.



‘the British emerged in 1947 in an influential position in both successor states, as their dislike of each other, as well as the need for a powerful ally, meant that the raj was wound up with official popularity in both India and Pakistan’.<sup>751</sup>

Britain’s favourable position is somewhat curious considering the Atlee government did little to allay the violence and atrocities at partition—its ‘first major diplomatic headache’<sup>752</sup>—despite pleas to do so from regional leaders. According to international relations analyst, Anita Inder Singh, in her seminal study *The Limits of British Influence*:

In October 1947, Jinnah appealed for Commonwealth intervention to clear up the manifold problems resulting from the partition riots. His request embarrassed officials in London. Reluctant to act as umpire in an Indo-Pakistani scrimmage, the Labour cabinet observed that Jinnah had not defined the kind of intervention desired....In any case, India would not be amenable to any foreign intervention. Investigations would only rake up the past bitterness...solutions were unlikely to emerge and links between the new dominions and the Commonwealth might be strained. Clearly the Labour government did not want to intervene....The matter would be left ‘to peter out in its present untidy state’.<sup>753</sup>

Notwithstanding Britain’s apparent apathy towards the subcontinent’s political struggles in the post-independence period, India and Pakistan, it would seem, valued an alliance with the former ruler—and the interest was mutual. For Britain, Pakistan offered multiple advantages: defence of the ‘free world’ against the Soviets, access to Middle Eastern oil and China, and the Pakistani Army, assiduously trained by the British, was the largest army in Asia with bases near the USSR.<sup>754</sup> Britain’s relationship with India, meanwhile, appeared to continue with nearly as much vigour as it had under the Raj, particularly with regards to trade and education.<sup>755</sup> Unable to conclude a defence

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<sup>751</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 3.

<sup>752</sup> Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 28.

<sup>753</sup> Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 28-29. Muhammed Ali Jinnah, widely regarded as the founder of Pakistan, was the country’s first Governor-General (15 August 1947–11 September 1948). In pre-partition India, Jinnah led The Muslim League, the largest political party to campaign on behalf of Muslim minority rights.

<sup>754</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 33, 229.

<sup>755</sup> Banerji *India and Britain, 1947-68*, 200; Arjan de Haan, ‘Indo-British Relations: A search for Perspectives’ in *India and Britain: Recent Past and Present Challenges* (revised papers from the School of Oriental and African Studies conference *India and Britain: Recent Past and Contemporary Challenges*, London UK, 21-23 September 1992), eds. K.N. Malik and Peter Robb (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1994), 75.

agreement with either country prior to independence, Britain hoped that the Commonwealth might provide a conduit to strategic cooperation in the post-colonial era.

However, the Indo-Pakistani war over the province of Kashmir (October 1947-December 1948) abruptly deflated hopes of meaningful regional collaboration. The British, already embarrassed by the recent carnage in their former Empire, were sensitive to the possibility of being held responsible by both sides for the Kashmir conflict.<sup>756</sup> The Cold War geopolitical web enmeshing the subcontinent, in addition, was particularly complex; 'British diplomacy had to work through several currents and cross currents: Anglo-American, Anglo-Indian, Anglo-Pakistani, Indo-US, Indo-Pakistani, and more broadly, Asian and Middle Eastern'.<sup>757</sup> HMG, as a result, chose to remain silent and urged the UN instead to mediate in the conflict.

From Pakistan's perspective, 'the British were a disappointment as they made it clear that they would not get involved in an inter-Commonwealth conflict' and it was becoming ever more apparent that 'Britain was not the power she had been'.<sup>758</sup> In contrast, the United States had been extending regular overtures in a bid to cement relations with what was considered a lynchpin to Cold War containment in Asia. Steady warmth from successive US administrations gradually dislodged Britain's lingering foothold 'as the new superpower moved worldwide to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the British empire',<sup>759</sup> with Pakistan as its most 'allied of ally'.<sup>760</sup>

Wishing to maintain strategic relations nevertheless—'a pro-West Pakistan ... was a prize worth retaining',<sup>761</sup>—both Britain and Pakistan, in 1955, entered into two collective defence treaties establishing the South East Asia Treaty Organization

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<sup>756</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 34; Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 29.

<sup>757</sup> Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 227.

<sup>758</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 223, 8.

<sup>759</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 2.

<sup>760</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 231; Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 238-240.

<sup>761</sup> Introduction by Humayun Khan to *The British Papers: Secret and Confidential India-Pakistan-Bangladesh Documents, 1958-1969*, ed. Roedad Khan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) xv.

(SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), both of which aimed to contain Soviet influence in the Far and Middle East.<sup>762</sup> It soon became evident, however, that the stronger members of both organisations, Britain included, were reluctant to commit the military resources required to endow them with the ‘teeth’ to enforce decisions. What is more, members were rarely able to decide on strategy when conflicts arose in their respective areas of interest.<sup>763</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the Wilson government began to seriously reconsider Britain’s membership in SEATO, and as recounted, ultimately set a schedule to cancel the last of its troop contributions by the spring of 1971.<sup>764</sup> Heath’s government, in accordance with its promises to continue defending the region, did not fully execute these plans—but neither did they actively participate in the organisation. Indeed, as Lord Carrington reassured the Defence and Oversea Policy Committee in February 1971, while retaining a military presence in the SEATO area helped to ensure political stability and preserve Western interests, membership was mainly ‘consultative in character’.<sup>765</sup> In the event of a conflict, members were not ‘unconditional[ly]’ obliged to commit forces—the decision to participate rested with individual signatories.<sup>766</sup> Similar remarks were expressed about CENTO;<sup>767</sup> both organisations, as one Heath official recalled, never moved beyond being ‘paper lions’, and were to be dissolved in the late 1970s.<sup>768</sup>

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<sup>762</sup> CENTO member states: Britain, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and by 1958, the United States; SEATO member states: Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the United States.

<sup>763</sup> See Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 230-232.

<sup>764</sup> CAB 148/116. Serial No. 11 or DOP (71) 11: ‘Declaration of Forces to SEATO: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Defence’, 12 February 1971.f

<sup>765</sup> CAB 148/115. DOP 71 (6<sup>th</sup> Meeting), 24 February, Item No 1: ‘Declaration of Forces to SEATO’; CAB 148/116: Serial No. 11 or DOP (71) 11: ‘Declaration of Forces to SEATO: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Defence’, 12 February 1971.

<sup>766</sup> CAB 148/115. DOP 71 (6<sup>th</sup> Meeting), 24 February, Item No 1: ‘Declaration of Forces to SEATO’.

<sup>767</sup> See UKNA: FCO 17/800 entitled ‘United Kingdom policy line towards Central Treaty Organisation’, 1969-1970, and UKNA: FCO 17/1408 entitled ‘UK policy to CENTO’, 1971.

<sup>768</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

Superseded by the Americans (arguably as early as the 1950s), and ‘unwilling and unable’<sup>769</sup> to assist Pakistan in subcontinental disputes, Britain had clearly placed the “bigger and more important neighbour”<sup>770</sup> at the core of its regional foreign policy. According to Bajwa, this was a step that it had intended to take in any event:

The British could not hope to compete with what the Americans could offer Pakistan militarily and economically, nor did they really wish to try. The British had decided early on that India was the far more desirable ally of the two and, although Pakistan’s air bases and raw fighting material made her useful, she was simply not in the same league as India.<sup>771</sup>

Yet Anglo-Indian links post-Empire, however robust, similarly began to display signs of erosion.<sup>772</sup> This was due partly to Britain’s evident reluctance to mediate in major conflicts following on the heels of partition, but also to the challenging economic relations between the two sterling area countries (related, for example, to the mutual imposition of extremely high import tariffs), which were never fully resolved.<sup>773</sup> In the meantime, India had shifted to non-alignment, and while external powers would always view the region from the perspective of geopolitics to some extent, to the British, ‘the subcontinent was not a major theatre of the cold war;....Britain could not provide large-scale military aid to India and Pakistan—but these countries did not need it since they were not menaced by the Soviets’.<sup>774</sup>

By the time India and Pakistan clashed once again over Kashmir from August to September of 1965, the British had demonstrated that they still retained a degree of influence in the region by successfully mediating a dispute over the Rann of Kutch area flanking both countries earlier that year.<sup>775</sup> Soon into the second Indo-Pakistan war,

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<sup>769</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 9.

<sup>770</sup> John Freeman, British High Commissioner to India (1965-1968), quoted in *The British Papers, 1958-1969*, xxi.

<sup>771</sup> Bajwa *Pakistan and the West*, 223.

<sup>772</sup> For an extended discussion, see Michael Lipton and John Firn’s influential *The Erosion of a Relationship: India and Britain since 1960* (London: Oxford University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1975).

<sup>773</sup> De Haan ‘Indo-British Relations’, 75-76; for background, see Brian R. Tomlinson, ‘Indo-British relations in the Post-colonial Era: the Sterling Balances Negotiations, 1947-49’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1985): 142-162.

<sup>774</sup> Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 229.

<sup>775</sup> See Jonathan Colman, ‘Britain and the Indo-Pakistani Conflict: The Rann of Kutch and Kashmir,

however, the Wilson government lost favour in Delhi following a number of statements made by the Prime Minister in Commons critical of Indian aggression. Wilson swiftly attributed his remarks to the misguided recommendations of his advisers rather than any personal proclivity for one side over the other, but was unable to recover the political authority necessary to mediate between the belligerents.<sup>776</sup>

To complicate matters was the unavoidable fact that all three held lowered expectations of the Commonwealth as a vehicle for concrete collaboration. For India and Pakistan as described, this occurred soon after independence, when the inertia surrounding clashes on the subcontinent indicated that the alliance was generally incapable of extending serious strategic or political assistance. Britain, for its part, had also clearly begun dealing less with the forum, whose intended strategic function as a 'substitute for Empire'<sup>777</sup> was gradually giving way to a somewhat more intangible 'family of nations',<sup>778</sup> rarely able to agree on practical matters.<sup>779</sup> Thus unable to exercise influence either multilaterally or through bilateral negotiations, Britain was consigned to stand aside, once again, during the second major war between the successor states of its former colony, and relations with both deteriorated perceptibly.

In light of events, Britain is considered to have entered a period of active 'disengagement'<sup>780</sup> with the Indian subcontinent beginning shortly after independence and continuing well into the Wilson era. Indeed, some consider that by 'the late 1960s, the talk of maturity in Indo-British relations seemed to be a euphemism for the loss of ardour and of emotional ambivalence, for disenchantment and quiet disillusion, for

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1965', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2009): 465-482.

<sup>776</sup> See Colman 'The Rann of Kutch and Kashmir, 1965', 465-482, and Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 69-72. For original Foreign Office documents pertaining to these events, see Roedad Khan's *The British Papers, 1958-1969*.

<sup>777</sup> Millar 'The Commonwealth and the U.N.', 36.

<sup>778</sup> Carrington *Reflect*, 281.

<sup>779</sup> For further analysis of Britain's 'disillusionment' with the Commonwealth, see Northedge *Descent from Power*, 228-237.

<sup>780</sup> Lipton and Fim *The Erosion of a Relationship*, 207.

reappraisal of each other's needs and priorities with mutually lowered expectations'.<sup>781</sup>

Without doubt, Britain's interactions with India and Pakistan following independence may appear remarkably diminished by comparison with what they had been under the Empire, or immediately afterwards, when all three hoped to foster strong associations bilaterally and through the Commonwealth. Yet, while the course of Anglo-Pakistani and Anglo-Indian relations did not meet the expectations of any party following independence, these were not as negligible as they may have appeared. For Britain, however erratic political relations between leaders may have been, remained reasonably active on the subcontinent, rarely losing sight of the region's basic value in terms of security, trade and development.

### ***1971: modest bilateral relations / India tilt***

So it was that in the year leading up to the secession of East from West Pakistan, Britain continued to harbour a variety of interests in both wings. HMG was one of Pakistan's main trading partners, receiving on average nearly 12% of the latter's exports and providing the same proportion in imports.<sup>782</sup> In addition, a total of 2000 British nationals lived in both wings of the country—business owners, development workers, missionaries, and in the Eastern wing, raw material producers and tea plantation owners.<sup>783</sup> After cyclones devastated coastal areas of the eastern province in November 1970, Britain mounted a series of major military aid operations in East Pakistan, assisting local authorities to restore stability. As the 1971 White Paper on Defence recalled, British air and naval forces—at the request of Pakistani authorities, had distributed relief, provided medical care, and repaired regional infrastructure in East

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<sup>781</sup> Banerji *India and Britain, 1947-68*, 287.

<sup>782</sup> FCO *Year Book of the Commonwealth 1971*, 330; FCO *Year Book of the Commonwealth 1972*, 340.

<sup>783</sup> UKNA: FCO 37/705 entitled 'Assistance & Aid to East Pakistan for Prevention of Economic Disaster'. 'Pakistan: Can Economic Disaster in East Pakistan be Averted?' Paper by the South Asia Department, 8 January 1969; CAB 148/117. 'India/Pakistan: Note by the Secretaries' (Part II: 'British Interests Likely to be Affected by War'), 24 November 1971.

Pakistan for three weeks from November to December of 1970.<sup>784</sup> On 2 March 1971, Edward Heath proudly informed Parliament, ‘The Services [in 1970] reacted with immense speed and efficiency, and during my visits to Pakistan...I heard...warm thanks and much praise for the work of the British forces’.<sup>785</sup>

‘Ideally,’ the Foreign Office commented, following the outbreak of state terror and regional insurgency, ‘the continued existence of a united Pakistan would best serve our interests and the stability of the area....We should like to see the restoration of peace and stability in an area in which we have considerable investments and political interests’.<sup>786</sup> The Cabinet subsequently agreed to avoid making critical statements in public—‘care should be taken to say nothing which might cause embarrassment to the Government of Pakistan’ or which might be construed as ‘interference’.<sup>787</sup>

This caution extended to the sensitive matter of arms sales. In the early 1970s, Britain supplied arms to Pakistan on a small-scale basis. They had not signed any major arms contracts since 1967, and the Foreign Secretary reassured Commons during the crisis that ‘[t]here is none in prospect’.<sup>788</sup> When Pakistan’s military action in its Eastern province began, Britain was caught between preserving these minor revenues and safeguarding Anglo-Pakistani relations, on the one hand, and on the other, not assisting—or at least not being seen to assist—the Army’s violent campaign. ‘If we do not permit the delivery of arms already ordered, the Pakistan government would realise very quickly that we were withholding supplies as a matter of policy,’ reflected

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<sup>784</sup> ‘East Pakistan Relief Operation’, point 58 of Government White Paper on Defence, 23 February 1971, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 139-140.

<sup>785</sup> ‘Speech by Mr. Edward Heath to Parliament, 2 March 1971’, in *Current British Foreign Policy*, 185-186.

<sup>786</sup> FCO 37/883. Brief No. 6: ‘Speaking Note: British Policy’ (notes for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting, London, 1 July 1971), 19 April 1971.

<sup>787</sup> CAB 128/49. Cabinet Meeting 23rd conclusion, 2<sup>nd</sup> minute, 29 April 1971.

<sup>788</sup> FCO 37/888. Alec Douglas-Home, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 29, 26 April 1971; the ‘Major Identified Arms Agreements’ sections in the 1971 and 1972 issues of *The Military Balance* support the statement.

Douglas-Home on internal communication in April 1971.<sup>789</sup> ‘This might be represented as a form of [sic] interference in Pakistan internal affairs, which we have publicly said is not our intention, and could be construed as evidence of British support for the quote rebels unquote in East Pakistan. If on the other hand we permit unrestricted arms supplies to Pakistan in present circumstances, HMG will certainly be subject to criticism in Parliament and from the public’.<sup>790</sup>

Douglas-Home resolved the conundrum with a semantic somersault; he limited arms sales to the unofficial category of ‘non lethal’:

I have decided that military equipment and supplies which are not by themselves lethal, such as mortar cartridges, fuses for artillery shells and chemical compounds for the manufacture of ammunition, may be delivered against existing orders. As most of our military sales to Pakistan come into this category [i.e. non lethal] I hope that the need for an obvious change of policy will not arise....I do not at this stage wish to lay down a rigid distinction between lethal and non lethal weapons: the distinction is only a broad one in our own minds and should have no publicity at all. Any requests from the Pakistan government for arms will be considered as they arise in the light of the circumstances at the time.<sup>791</sup>

In this manner, Britain continued in its role as a small-scale (non-lethal) arms supplier to Pakistan; it met the aforementioned orders and successfully shielded this aspect of the Anglo-Pakistani relationship from controversy, while at the same time, discreetly refraining from entering into discussions on future orders.

Anglo-Pakistani relations under Heath were, in other words, mutually beneficial at the beginning of 1971, and the British sought to retain this state of affairs by assuring regional authorities of their neutrality. However, as public pressure mounted and it became clear that violence in the Eastern wing was becoming an international affair generating millions of refugees across the borders of India—Britain’s chief interest—the government position began to harden. This hardening manifested itself most clearly in the British decision to suspend development aid along with other Aid Consortium

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<sup>789</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 592 ‘Arms Sales to Pakistan’, FCO—Islamabad, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington, 17 April 1971.

<sup>790</sup> PREM 15/568. 17 April 1971 Telegram 592 ‘Arms Sales to Pakistan’, FCO—Islamabad.

<sup>791</sup> PREM 15/568. 17 April 1971 Telegram 592 ‘Arms Sales to Pakistan’, FCO—Islamabad.



members. Anglo-Pakistani relations, as recounted, reached an ‘all time low’<sup>792</sup> and although this was disagreeable, London accepted that its interests in the region would have to suffer marginally. Indeed, ‘that need not necessarily be a wholly bad thing,’ the British High Commissioner in Pakistan remarked, considering where Britain’s prime allegiance lay.<sup>793</sup>

Britain’s tilt towards India in 1971, a classic component of post-war foreign policy, is unsurprising: India, with its larger economy, weightier regional political status and longer history of democratic government, was where Britain’s chief commercial and development investments on the subcontinent were situated, and where 12,000 British nationals lived and worked.<sup>794</sup> Edward Heath, in addition, had established relatively warm political relations with the Gandhi government during a series of meetings between the two leaders in 1971, Heath’s January trip to India being the first made by a British prime minister for over a decade.<sup>795</sup> This positive state of affairs, both external observers and former civil servants agreed, stood in some contrast to ‘the coolness of the Wilson era’.<sup>796</sup> Thus British officials advised early into the crisis, ‘we must not prejudice our long-term interests, and offend the Indians, in seeking unwisely to defend short-term interests in West Pakistan’.<sup>797</sup> ‘In the last analysis, our stake in India is much greater’.<sup>798</sup>

Former officials in the Heath government agree on the primacy of India over Pakistan within the Foreign Office: ‘India would always be the favourite’, confirmed Peter Smith of the Islamabad High Commission, ‘there was never any doubt that Delhi

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<sup>792</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1416 ‘British Commercial Interests in Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 8 July 1971.

<sup>793</sup> PREM 15/569. Letter ‘First Impressions of Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, 21 September 1971.

<sup>794</sup> CAB 148/117. ‘India/Pakistan: Note by the Secretaries’ (Part II: ‘British Interests Likely to be Affected by War’), 24 November 1971.

<sup>795</sup> Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 139-140.

<sup>796</sup> Roth *Heathmen*, 227; John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009; Richard Fell, Interview by author, 16 July 2009.

<sup>797</sup> PREM 15/568. Telegram 488 ‘My Tel No 485: East Pakistan’, Islamabad—FCO, n. d. April 1971.

<sup>798</sup> FCO 37/890: Letter, SAD—FCO, 28 July 1971.

had the ear of London'.<sup>799</sup> Meanwhile, at the South Asia Department, the India desk was by far the most influential in shaping regional policy.<sup>800</sup> As the British parliamentary delegation to the subcontinent in the summer of 1971 were told pointedly by the Foreign Office before their departure, 'India is a British interest. Always remember that'.<sup>801</sup>

What is more, the Heath government appeared to commiserate with the burden imposed upon India by the refugee exodus, a burden that Indian representatives avowed was endangering the country's national security, social fabric and economic stability. The International Commission of Jurists, in their 1972 legal study of the conflict, noted that the refugee stream into India raised the total world figure, in just over six months, from 17.6 million to 27.6 million and the increase affected only one country.<sup>802</sup> The cost of sheltering this 'flood of destitute humanity' until the end of the year was estimated at over 500 million dollars and likely to increase.<sup>803</sup> Consequently, in addition to the dire social and political ramifications of the refugee flow, the effect on the Indian economy would be to 'disrupt, possibly even to halt for several years, the normal economic development of the whole country....We find neither historical precedent nor juridical definition applicable to this situation'.<sup>804</sup>

The British thus remained in regular contact with Indira Gandhi and other officials, assuring them Britain was trying to defuse the crisis in order to inhibit the flow of refugees. As the Assistant Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary emphasized to Downing Street:

The Indians still harbour suspicions that H.M.G. tend to favour the Government of Islamabad and it is important to make it clear that this is not so and that we are doing what we can behind the scenes to influence President Yahya Khan. Moreover, whatever the ultimate relationship between the East and West wings, Pakistan has become weakened...and the relative importance of India in the sub-continent has been

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<sup>799</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

<sup>800</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009; Richard Fell, Interview by author, 16 July 2009.

<sup>801</sup> James Ramsden 'East Bengal 1971' (written account), enclosed in 11 September 2009 email to author.

<sup>802</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, 'The Role of India', 92.

<sup>803</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, 'The Role of India', 92.

<sup>804</sup> ICJ *Legal Study*, 'The Role of India', 92.

increased. In present circumstances our interest lies in retaining with Mrs. Gandhi as close and satisfactory a working relationship as we can.<sup>805</sup>

In evidence of this relationship, the Foreign Secretaries of both countries publicly issued the previously mentioned 'Agreed Statement' in June 1971, declaring that a 'political solution must...be found which was acceptable to the people of East Pakistan'.<sup>806</sup> Pakistani authorities objected—the statement not only attested to Britain's tilt towards India, they declared, it 'is a clear attempt at interference in the internal affairs of a Commonwealth country'.<sup>807</sup> 'In the face of incontrovertible evidence of blatant Indian threats and attempts at bullying and browbeating, it is a matter of extreme regret that the British government should have found it necessary to compliment India on her "restraint and generosity"'.<sup>808</sup> Unfortunately, 'statements of this nature have set a new and regrettable pattern of relationship between Commonwealth countries'.<sup>809</sup> Britain's Foreign Secretary while dismayed by this reaction, remained convinced that 'the more we demonstrated friendship for Pakistan the greater the risk of incurring Indian displeasure'.<sup>810</sup>

A joint approach to both countries via Commonwealth mediation, moreover, appeared unfeasible, just as it had in past Indo-Pakistani clashes. Janice Musson claims that British officials did not hold Arnold Smith, the Commonwealth Secretary General (1965-1975), in particularly high regard.<sup>811</sup> Widely considered to be a figurehead rather than a negotiator, Smith appeared to have had 'no coherent strategy' to mediate.<sup>812</sup> In his memoirs, Smith himself, earnestly recounts the two occasions when he personally approached Indian and Pakistani leaders in the hopes of acting as an arbitrator; these, he

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<sup>805</sup> PREM 15/568. Letter, Ian McCluney FCO—10 Downing Street, 25 May 1971.

<sup>806</sup> PREM 15/569. 'Note of the Prime Minister's Meeting with Mr. Swaran Singh, Indian Foreign Minister', 10 Downing Street, 21 June 1971.

<sup>807</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1374 enclosing text of 2<sup>nd</sup> Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs note, Islamabad—FCO 5 July 1971.

<sup>808</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1374, Islamabad—FCO 5 July 1971.

<sup>809</sup> PREM 15/569. Telegram 1374, Islamabad—FCO 5 July 1971.

<sup>810</sup> CAB 148/115. Item No 4: 'Pakistan', 29 July 1971.

<sup>811</sup> Janice Musson, 'Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh in 1972', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2008): 136-138.

<sup>812</sup> Musson, 'Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh', 136.

says, came to no avail, not because of any shortcoming in his strategy, but simply because neither party appeared confident in the Commonwealth as a medium for intervention.<sup>813</sup> Thus although ‘on the face of it, the vaunted informality and intimacy of the Commonwealth association should have furnished the ideal circumstances for good offices in the Indo-Pakistan dispute,’ remarks Northedge, it was unable to offer such recourse.<sup>814</sup> ‘Neither India nor Pakistan have much regard for the Commonwealth,’ Heath’s Minister of Defence rightly concluded in October of 1971 as tensions between the two escalated, ‘and I see no scope for action in this forum’.<sup>815</sup>

For Britain, violence in East Pakistan was not only Pakistan’s ‘internal affair’—it was also India’s. HMG consequently left the matter to the Gandhi government as the conflict evolved, having concluded that a brief war would in fact increase India’s cachet. For if, the Foreign Secretary reflected, the subcontinent was to ‘henceforth be divided in three...India is the only one of the three of whose political future one can feel reasonably sure’; ‘India will...be the most stable of the three entities in the sub-continent, the most powerful and, to western interests, the most important’.<sup>816</sup>

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<sup>813</sup> Arnold C. Smith with Clyde Sanger, *Stitches in Time: The Commonwealth in World Politics* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1981), 132-140.

<sup>814</sup> Northedge *Descent from Power*, 231, 236-237.

<sup>815</sup> CAB 148/117. ‘India and Pakistan: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’, Cabinet: Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 18 October 1971.

<sup>816</sup> CAB 148/115. ‘India and Pakistan: Note by the Sec State for FCO Affairs’, 20 December 1971.

*Chapter Summary: the subcontinent's 'reduced importance'*

Notwithstanding the relative closeness of London and Delhi in 1971, Britain's tilt towards India was just that—a tilt, not a forthright pledge of unconditional support. In truth, the Cabinet Defence Committee had decided that a short war between India and Pakistan, which the former was likely to win, would not drastically jeopardise HMG's interests: 'British investment in both countries is substantial. Some running down of activity must be expected. But the assumption is that both countries will try to keep going industries connected with the war effort, and export industries....Unless widespread and prolonged, hostilities following the expected course would not directly and seriously affect British interests'.<sup>817</sup> Under the circumstances, while leaning towards India was viewed as beneficial, the British did not consider any form of support that that might have expressed this too concretely.<sup>818</sup>

In the preceding years, India had gradually slipped from the top of Britain's foreign policy agenda, leading some observers to declare that the Indo-British relationship from the late 1950s can at best be described as 'thin'. According to Arjan de Haan, 'Indo-British relations are not merely "thin", but have evolved from being among the most important in the "world system" towards being negligible'; 'A question which comes to mind when reading about Indo-British relations is: what relations?'<sup>819</sup>

Given the Heath administration's varied efforts to influence events on the subcontinent in 1971, this is somewhat of an overstatement. Britain kept in close contact with Indian officials; it ignored India's involvement with East Pakistani guerrillas, occasionally defended the Gandhi administration to Pakistani officials, and remained neutral during the Indo-Pakistani war, when other states were pressuring India

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<sup>817</sup> CAB 148/117. 'India/Pakistan: Note by the Secretaries' (Part II: 'British Interests Likely to be Affected by War'), 24 November 1971.

<sup>818</sup> HMG, for example, refrained from supplying major arms to India during the crisis, apart from two agreements for equipment entered into in October of 1971 that were to be delivered between 1972 and 1973 (*The Military Balance*, 'Major Identified Arms Agreements', 1971 and 1972).

<sup>819</sup> De Haan, 'Indo-British Relations', 84, 83.

to accept a ceasefire. The Indo-British relationship, at least with regards to this crisis (and particularly during the latter half), was not ‘thin’, but moderately dynamic.

Yet the fact remains that India, while still a British interest, fell far behind the European and domestic priorities of the government. It therefore comes as little surprise that key analyses of British foreign policy in the post-war era tend to omit mention of the Indo-British relationship, fundamental as it once was. David Sanders’ influential *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role* (1990), as De Haan points out, claims to look at “the most important developments”<sup>820</sup> since 1945—and ‘the relationship with India is clearly not among these’.<sup>821</sup> Likewise, David Reynolds’s well-received *Britannia Overruled* (2000) passes over the post-colonial Indo-British relationship with notable brevity. Hence, following the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, the Foreign Secretary reminded the Cabinet Overseas Defence Committee, ‘in terms of our worldwide interests, the sub-continent is today of much reduced importance’.<sup>822</sup> Britain’s overarching policy, from their perspective, had been to remain ‘equidistant between India and Pakistan’, a position which they prided themselves, ‘no other large power has succeeded in doing’.<sup>823</sup>

In 1971, Britain may have tended towards that part of the subcontinent where the majority of her interests lay, but in the post-war era, those interests occupied at best a secondary (even tertiary) place on its foreign policy agenda. They could not induce the British to get actively involved in the region again—indeed it had not done so, neither bilaterally nor through the Commonwealth, during any of the subcontinent’s major upheavals.

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<sup>820</sup> Quoted in De Haan ‘Indo-British Relations’, 71.

<sup>821</sup> De Haan ‘Indo-British Relations’, 71.

<sup>822</sup> CAB 148/117. ‘India and Pakistan: Note by the Sec State for FCO Affairs’ regarding ‘British Policy on the Indian Subcontinent in the Aftermath of a Ceasefire’, 20 December 1971.

<sup>823</sup> PREM 15/2010. Covering Note on Draft Reply to Bhutto, 10 Downing Street (internal circulation), 11 February 1972.

Britain, after World War II, entered a phase in which internal and external circumstances consistently prevented it from pursuing its desired policies towards South Asia. In 1947, economic decline, domestic problems and upheaval on the subcontinent finally forced the British to relinquish their 'jewel in the crown'. Afterwards, these same factors, exacerbated by the independent foreign policies of the successor states and the seeming inefficacy of the Commonwealth association, dashed Britain's hopes for maintaining a strong strategic alliance with either. Moreover, having set a precedent of neutrality and non-intervention after partition and again (twice) in Kashmir, 'the British [had] annoyed both dominions....[and] their unequivocal attitude reflected their fast-ebbing influence in South Asia'.<sup>824</sup> Subsequent British governments continued dismantling the Empire and retreating from international activity (albeit haphazardly), culminating in Labour's military retrenchments in the late 1960s.

Thus while many consider Britain's failed intervention in Suez the end of its great power status, Britain's inability a decade earlier to keep its Indian Empire, or to retain robust links with it afterwards, sounded the definitive finale of 'Pax Britannia'.

As Lawrence James states:

India's own liberation signalled the end of Britain as a world power. Its international standing had already declined beyond the point of recovery....India had always been the keystone of the British Empire, and once it had been removed the structure swiftly fell apart....And yet in the quarter-century after Indian independence, British politicians, diplomats and strategists talked themselves into believing that their country was still a world power and behaved accordingly. In fact, it was downhill all the way with some awkward bumps...and attempt to reverse fate ended disastrously with the Suez debacle in 1956.<sup>825</sup>

Edward Heath, a prime example of the disorderly change in British official thinking, hailed 1970 as a 'new era in British diplomacy which would leave behind years of retreat',<sup>826</sup> and just months later, reassured European audiences that Britain's imperial activities were at an end; Heath, as they say, 'U-turned'. However, the government's

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<sup>824</sup> Inder Singh *The Limits of British Influence*, 29-30.

<sup>825</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 641.

<sup>826</sup> Heath's first speech as PM to the Conservative Party Conference, 10 October 1970 (quoted in Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 286).

U-turns in foreign policy were not only the consequence of false promises or ineptitude. For the British lacked not necessarily the will, but mainly the enabling circumstances to decisively exert influence in regions in which they had once been active—let alone in their former Indian colony from whence they had so hastily withdrawn a quarter of a century earlier. Britain's days of Empire were unmistakably over: 'No longer were vast stretches of Africa and Asia to be daubed pink in the atlases of the world, as had been the case before 1945, when over one-fourth of the earth's surface was ruled one way or the other from London or the British Commonwealth capitals'.<sup>827</sup>

This reduced state of affairs however did not prevent the British from finding minor avenues through which to retain influence abroad and advance bilateral relations with the successor states on the subcontinent, however vulnerable these relations were to changing leadership and circumstances. So it was that during the East Pakistan crisis in 1971, the British upheld a varied policy predicated on neutrality and non-interference, at the same time as they pressured for a political resolution, sought to ease humanitarian suffering, and subtly supported their long-standing interest on the subcontinent, India. Many of these actions, it would seem, had precedents in an earlier era, and are thus indicative of a nuanced pattern in Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Pakistan relations in the post-independence age.

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<sup>827</sup> Robert A Huttenback, *Kashmir and the British Raj 1847–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vii.



## V. CONCLUSION

*‘All judgement in history is, to some extent, provisional. Some questions—who initiated policy, what it was, when did it occur and where—are easier to answer than why did events happen as they did, and with what effect. For historical judgement to have any value, it must be deeply rooted in the events as they unfolded, and the options which were open at the time’.*

— Anthony Seldon, ‘The Heath Government in History’<sup>828</sup>

After the crisis ended in December 1971 with India’s victory (and by extension East Pakistan’s), it became clear that Britain’s diverse courses of action had, to a large extent, succeeded in protecting its regional interests—and established a positive relationship with the victorious party. Trade between India and Britain increased, with British exports experiencing a rise of over 75% compared to the previous year, while relations between the two heads of states remained notably cordial.<sup>829</sup>

In war-ravaged but newly independent East Pakistan, meanwhile, the British were highly regarded. Foreign Office representatives provided regional advice to the many international NGO representatives arriving in the area, and the British Council actively assisted the education sector to recover and rebuild following the loss of life and damage caused to universities at the start of the military repression.<sup>830</sup> On 4 February 1972, furthermore, Britain officially recognized East Pakistan as the state of Bangladesh. According to Janice Musson’s study of British diplomatic files during the period, this decision was not taken out of hostility towards Pakistan (as President Bhutto charged as he withdraw Pakistan from the Commonwealth), but rather because the new state was widely considered to have met the formal international legal requirements for political recognition having ‘a permanent population, specific territory, effective government and the ability to relate with other states’.<sup>831</sup> Hence, as Britain’s former

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<sup>828</sup> Seldon ‘Heath Government’, 13.

<sup>829</sup> Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 463; John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009; for statistical details of Anglo-Indian trade see FCO *Year Book of the Commonwealth* 1972.

<sup>830</sup> See UKNA: British Council file 90/2101, entitled ‘Bangladesh: Aid to Bengali Universities following Civil War and Independence from Pakistan’, 1971-1974.

<sup>831</sup> Musson is referring to Article 1 of the 1933 Montevideo Convention (‘Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh’, 125, 130). For details, see file UKNA: FCO 37/1046 entitled ‘UK Policy Towards Bangladesh’.

Deputy High Commissioner recalls: ‘We were always very courteously received in Bangladesh...Indeed, we became very popular because we were understood to be sympathetic to the Bengali cause. We were not overtly pro-Bengali, but we must have done something to help from time to time. We were in good “odour”, one might say. Whether we achieved a great deal is another matter’.<sup>832</sup>

The founding Bangladeshi government, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came under immediate domestic pressure to try members of the Pakistani army and their supporters for war crimes. Consequently, an ‘Order for Constitution of War Crimes Tribunal 1972’ was issued, back-dated to 26 March 1971 (the date Awami League leaders had unilaterally declared Bangladesh’s independence). British officials were contrary to the trials: such a form of justice, they feared, would prevent a climate of reconciliation, both in Bangladesh and in Pakistan; it could also complicate ongoing negotiations over the tens of thousands Indian and Pakistani POWs remaining in the two countries; lastly, there were considerable concerns that trials in the fragile new country would simply be unable to meet international norms of legality.<sup>833</sup> ‘The Bangladesh Government’, the head of the South Asia Department reflected, ‘...would do well to avoid an “Asian Nuremberg”’.<sup>834</sup>

The British, however, were reluctant to petition Bangladeshi authorities too strongly. ‘We had not felt able to do this mainly because we ourselves had participated in the Nuremberg trials;...We also consider that there was too much political pressure on Sheikh Mujib to expect him to drop the trials altogether but that it would be very desirable...for the whole affair to be played down as much as possible’.<sup>835</sup> Britain’s representative in New Delhi agreed: ‘I imagine that our participation in the Nuremberg

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<sup>832</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>833</sup> UKNA: FCO 57/1056 entitled ‘Trial of Collaborators in Bangladesh’. Minute ‘Bangladesh Collaborators (Special Tribunals) Order 1972’, Dacca—SAD, 27 January 1972; FCO 57/1056. Letter ‘War Crimes Trials in Bangladesh’, FCO—SAD, 30 March 1972; FCO 57/1056. Note ‘War Crimes Trials in Bangladesh’, SAD (internal circulation), 10 April 1972.

<sup>834</sup> FCO 57/1056. Letter ‘Bangladesh War Crimes’, SAD—FCO, 25 March 1972.

<sup>835</sup> FCO 57/1056. Memo ‘War Crimes Trials in Bangladesh’, SAD—FCO, 16 June 1972.

trials, and the overwhelming evidence of the savage atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army, will make it hard for us to oppose in principle a properly conducted tribunal, however much in this day and age we may find it distasteful'.<sup>836</sup> Bangladesh, engaged as it was in massive post-war reconstruction efforts, eventually stopped pursuing the issue having accepted the political necessity (stressed by British officials) of reaching an official reconciliation with Pakistan.<sup>837</sup>

The subject of Britain at the birth of Bangladesh is clearly beginning to draw the attention of scholars. Simon Smith, as described, uses the crisis to underline the differences in Anglo and American approaches to Asia in the post-war era, arguing that HMG's regional activities in the fields of aid and bilateral diplomacy (as distinct from the USA's questionable geopolitical strategies) demonstrate that the Heath administration had global interests, which it pursued with remarkable results. '[B]y adopting a policy of backing the winning side, Britain had successfully navigated the treacherous waters of crisis and war in South Asia while protecting its interests in the subcontinent'.<sup>838</sup> Smith is correct that Britain's varied responses in 1971 established beneficial links with India and Bangladesh—or what Joseph Godber, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, referred to as “the winning side”.<sup>839</sup> What is more, relations with the defeated party remained relatively intact. Smith points out that even though Pakistan withdrew from the Commonwealth in 1972, the High Commissioner in Islamabad was soon able to report that British trade and industrial interests had “not suffered as much as might have been expected, partly because the commercial centre is in Karachi, out of

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<sup>836</sup> FCO 57/1056. Letter, Delhi—Islamabad and FCO, 28 February 1972.

<sup>837</sup> For a brief discussion of other issues complicating war crimes trials, see Dirk Moses, ‘The United Nations, Humanitarianism and Human Rights: War Crimes/Genocide Trials for Pakistani Soldiers in Bangladesh, 1971-1974’, in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century: A Critical History*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 273-276.

<sup>838</sup> Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 463.

<sup>839</sup> “Britain has endeavoured to retain some degree of impartiality although, in effect,” Godber noted on 15 December 1971, “we have come down on the winning side” (quoted in Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 462).

the political main stream”.<sup>840</sup> Smith’s favourable view of British ‘nuanced responses’<sup>841</sup> to the crisis, in part shared by this thesis, counters those historians of post-war Britain who suggest that the Eurocentric Heath government had next to no overseas ambitions (the ‘Thatcherite view’ discussed below). Concerned with the efficacy and implications of British foreign policy in 1971, however, Smith pays little attention to Britain’s perceptions of the violence in East Pakistan itself; there is scant description and no analysis of regional intelligence reports. Indeed, Britain’s decision not to acknowledge state-endorsed atrocities against civilians is avoided entirely, an omission that casts a shadow over the article’s complimentary assessment of the government.

International relations specialist, Karen E. Smith’s brief review of the crisis in *Genocide and the Europeans*, by contrast, focuses exclusively on Britain’s private and public responses to reports of systematic violence by Pakistani forces. In her summary of these reports, Smith states: ‘The despatches do not use the term genocide, though arguably they are in fact describing it’.<sup>842</sup> Hence, the Foreign Office’s incriminating assessment “that the Government of Pakistan are in breach of the Genocide Convention; it would certainly be difficult to argue they are not”.<sup>843</sup> Karen Smith correctly describes Britain’s interpretation of its duties under the Genocide Convention as a notably ‘narrow reading’.<sup>844</sup> This restricted interpretation, she concludes disapprovingly, led ‘to no action taken and no declaration using the term “genocide” to describe events’.<sup>845</sup> Focusing her description of the crisis exclusively on the actions of the Pakistani state, Smith fails to mention violence committed by non-state actors in East Pakistan, a prominent feature of British reports that largely shaped official responses, and reinforced the reluctance to use the term genocide. Her critical appraisal of Britain’s

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<sup>840</sup> Islamabad to FCO, 1 January 1972 (quoted in Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 463).

<sup>841</sup> Smith ‘Britain and the South Asia Crisis’, 463.

<sup>842</sup> Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 84.

<sup>843</sup> Quoted in Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 87.

<sup>844</sup> Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 83, 88.

<sup>845</sup> Smith *Genocide and the Europeans*, 88.

apparent inaction contrasts markedly with Simon Smith's rather rosy account of Britain's efficacious responses. This divergence may reflect the fact that these authors approach the conflict from different perspectives (international relations versus post-war British history), and therefore emphasise distinct aspects of the crisis. Nevertheless, neither treatment describes or analyses the violence itself in the detail one might expect when writing about responses to a civil war and possible genocide.

Richard Pilkington's analysis of Canada's official responses towards the East Pakistan crisis, while providing a useful comparison to British responses, is marred by the same oversight. Pilkington describes how the British diplomatic files upon which Canadian intelligence was based, essentially described a one-sided state persecution campaign, which Canada nevertheless maintained was a civil war and so continued bilateral aid disbursements to Pakistan. Canadian responses, the author argues, were shaped by a short-term formulation of Canada's national interests, defined as maintaining influence in Islamabad through cordial relations with the military junta—as opposed to pursuing 'Canada's broader global interests in the longer term, through the promotion of its human rights and democratic values'.<sup>846</sup> By favouring the former formulation, Pilkington concludes that the Canadian government took the 'moral low ground'<sup>847</sup> and ultimately upheld a policy belying 'an unfortunate absence of principle and an uncomfortable air of appeasement'.<sup>848</sup>

Pilkington's article does not address whether the Canadian government in 1971 explicitly defined the promotion of democracy and human rights as a national interest (by most accounts, this would appear to be a recent formulation). More to the point, the author (as those above) does not refer to widespread atrocities committed by Bengalis against 'non-Bengalis' and others, which were also described in British reports. His description of the affair, in other words, would be considerably more textured if it

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<sup>846</sup> Pilkington 'Canada and the East Pakistan crisis', 469.

<sup>847</sup> Pilkington 'Canada and the East Pakistan crisis', 452, 468.

<sup>848</sup> Pilkington 'Canada and the East Pakistan crisis', 451, 452, 469.

referred to the complicated picture external observers were confronted with, which by and large weighed against expressions of wholesale condemnation of one party.

The historian Dirk Moses does address the various forms of violence in his study of the crisis.<sup>849</sup> He describes how different actors, depending on their agenda, tended to frame the East Pakistan crisis in exclusive terms: either as a civil war in a sovereign state or as a struggle for self-determination against a genocidal regime, rather than admit that multiple dimensions of violence were unfolding, genocidal or otherwise. The British, by supporting the civil war narrative and refusing to condemn the Pakistani terror campaign publicly or privately, sought to justify their commitment to the inviolability of state sovereignty. What is more, by continuing to cautiously pressure Pakistani leaders to reach a political solution, even though it was evident that no political solution was forthcoming, British diplomatic efforts were ‘riddled with contradiction’.<sup>850</sup> ‘In substance,’ Moses concludes, ‘the UK position accorded with that of Pakistan itself’.<sup>851</sup>

In his generally disapproving assessment of the British, based on diplomatic files covering the first three months of the conflict, Moses makes a key point: government officials insisted on portraying the conflict exclusively as a civil war, despite reports indicating that systematic persecution by Pakistani forces—or ‘genocide’—was taking place. Meanwhile civil society—the British media, parliamentarians, and Bengalis themselves—maintained the opposite. By doing so, he accurately observes, both parties promoted simplistic versions of what was actually a composite moment of violence, perpetrated by a variety of state and non-state actors alike. All the same, Moses’ suggestion that Britain effectively sided with Pakistan is questionable. Although the Heath administration did seek to maintain relations with the country’s leadership and avoid direct interference in its affairs, Britain discreetly tilted towards India (and

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<sup>849</sup> Moses, ‘Britain and the Secession of East Pakistan’, forthcoming.

<sup>850</sup> Moses, ‘Britain and the Secession of East Pakistan’, forthcoming.

<sup>851</sup> Moses, ‘Britain and the Secession of East Pakistan’, forthcoming.

therefore East Pakistan) as the conflict evolved, out of strategic and humanitarian concerns; moreover, the government's motives for espousing the 'civil war narrative' were not entirely cynical.

British intelligence indicates that East Pakistan in 1971 experienced a nexus of extreme violence characterized by state terror, both systematic and spontaneous, and nationalist uprising. Reports on government forces and nationalist combatants graphically describe atrocities committed by both parties against perceived opponents. These are followed, to a lesser degree, by descriptions of violence between ordinary civilians, arising from pre-existing tensions and opportunism afforded by the general 'state of lawlessness'.<sup>852</sup> Communal violence at the local level—that is, between ordinary civilians in East Pakistan—appeared to be an underlying aspect of the violence, woven into the greater fabric of state terror and murderous civil war.

In London, accounts of violence on all sides and the generally conflicting behaviour of the Pakistani military after the opening assault, consistently undercut those that detailed the army's systematic persecution of civilians, brutal as this persecution was. As a consequence, British officials concluded that East Pakistan from March to December 1971 was embroiled in a bitter civil war fuelled by ethnic hatred, not only to justify their commitment to non-interference, but also because they genuinely believed so. The Foreign Office's two internal assessments that Pakistan's government may in fact have been guilty of breaching the Genocide Convention were not enough, on their own, to alter the wider interpretation of events.

This interpretation, it is true, legitimated Britain's commitment to non-involvement while at the same time accurately describing one major aspect of the violence, namely that of civil war, a term which became an umbrella for the range of international crimes committed. As Douglas-Home stated during the first weeks of the

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<sup>852</sup> FCO 37/886. Telegram 421 'High Commissioner: East Pakistan' Dacca—FCO, 19 May 1971.

crisis, when Pakistan's campaign of systematic repression was arguably at its height: 'We reacted very quickly to the horrible events that took place in Pakistan—but these events do take place in civil wars'.<sup>853</sup> Britain's perceptions of the violence, concerns for its regional interests, as well as Cold War geopolitical paralysis and related sense of impotence, reinforced the Heath administration's inherent preference for neutrality and non-interference—a preference that also led them to ignore, or at the most, pay only superficial attention to reports of state atrocities. For the fact remains that British intelligence (particularly during the first weeks of violence), did describe a punitive military campaign against perceived opponents and ordinary civilians, authorized by the central government. Thus the British High Commissioner in Islamabad in 1971, in seeking to attribute responsibility for the Army's actions, concluded that 'While he [the Pakistani President] is open to [the] influence of his closest associates the final decisions appear to rest with him'.<sup>854</sup> Britain's former representative in Dacca agrees: 'I am quite satisfied that the "punitive action", carried out against East Pakistanis, which included destruction and killing—teaching them a lesson, in a sense—was a deliberate decision taken by the Army headquarters in Islamabad, with the authority of the President'.<sup>855</sup>

It would seem that the British government did not wish to receive 'gory reports from Dacca'<sup>856</sup> describing mass killing by state forces. Concerned that such descriptions were 'less than objective',<sup>857</sup> it is possible that those who submitted what resembled 'emotional and rumour-laden reporting'<sup>858</sup> were replaced by diplomats who had less regional knowledge and therefore less attachment, or those who were

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<sup>853</sup> FCO 37/888. Alec Douglas-Home, clipping of *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, col. 29, 26 April 1971.

<sup>854</sup> FCO 37/890. Telegram 1615 'Assessments on Pakistan', Islamabad—FCO, 26 July 1971.

<sup>855</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009.

<sup>856</sup> John Birch, Interview by author, 23 September 2009.

<sup>857</sup> FCO 37/885. Report 'Situation in EastPak' (handwritten annotation), SAD—FCO (internal circulation), 13 April 1971.

<sup>858</sup> The Foreign Office's alleged description of Deputy High Commissioner Frank Sargeant's reporting of the crisis, quoted in Blood *The Cruel Birth*, 323.



inexperienced, accustomed to administration, and who could, while diligently reporting systematic terror in East Pakistan respect it as the internal affair of a sovereign state. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office furnished the government with rationale why Britain need not pursue allegations of state terror, either through the UN or by activating the Genocide Convention, essentially because they were not obliged to do so under international law (narrowly interpreted), because of their powerlessness and distance from events, and because of the threat such action would have posed to their regional interests. In 1971, officials in the British government, whether in London or on the subcontinent, appeared to agree that the carnage in East Pakistan “was the responsibility of neither Britain nor the world”.<sup>859</sup> ‘They realized there was bad behaviour, but...it was not much good us making a fuss about it, because there was nothing whatever we could do to redress the balance’.<sup>860</sup> Britain’s perception of events, it would seem, was indeed a convenient truth—employed variably by government actors on a conscious and subconscious level.

In keeping with this perspective, Britain sought to influence events by exercising discreet diplomacy, sending and withholding aid, and subtly tilting towards India—the only practical ways, it seemed, to ease suffering during the civil war, while at the same time, maintain regional interests and uphold Britain’s image at home. On those occasions when the government was able to do the latter, little need was felt for stronger action. In particular, Britain was given widespread credit for its contribution to the humanitarian crisis, which in comparison to that of other governments, was generous. Having received this recognition, regardless of how effective it actually was to ease suffering on the subcontinent, they refrained from extending further relief assistance. Publicity and public opinion, both negative and positive, often conditioned HMG’s actions in 1971.

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<sup>859</sup> Terence Garvey, Britain’s High Commissioner to India in 1971 (quoted in Musson, ‘Britain and the Recognition of Bangladesh in 1972’, 141). (Garvey is pictured in Appendix Document 23.)

<sup>860</sup> Peter Smith, Interview by author, 16 June 2009.

Indeed, it would seem that a large portion of the government's decisions in 1971 were taken on a mostly spontaneous or ad hoc basis in response to circumstances as they arose. 'Did they have a policy? I don't think I knew what it was at the time! Governments do not have policies—they react,' declared Peter Smith recalling his experiences of the Foreign Office.<sup>861</sup> Meanwhile, from the former High Commissioner Cyril Pickard's perspective, 'it might be argued that foreign policy is never formulated at all....Indeed, it could be argued that British foreign policy since the war has basically been to deal with crises as they turn up'.<sup>862</sup>

When it came to foreign policy decisions in 1971, Heath famously focused on European entry, while non-European affairs fell under the remit of Alec Douglas-Home. And while there was concern that Downing Street may occasionally have crossed this boundary, both the former Deputy High Commissioner in Dacca and Home's Private Undersecretary were unequivocal in their view that 'In those days, the Foreign Secretary was his own man'.<sup>864</sup> With the exception of Europe, moreover, the Prime Minister did not appear to have 'cherry pick[ed] important issues'<sup>865</sup> over which he wished to exercise influence. Thus '[f]oreign policy under the Heath government can reasonably be seen as a *mare tranquillitatis* by comparison to the domestic troubles which finally engulfed it, with such [overseas] traumas as there were being externally generated and affecting Britain for the most part indirectly'.<sup>866</sup> The East Pakistan crisis certainly constituted the latter, and while both Heath and Home were active on different aspects of the crisis, neither expressed overt interest (as they did with East-West

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<sup>861</sup> Peter Smith, Telephone Interview by author, 10 June 2009.

<sup>862</sup> Pickard, 'The Formulation of Foreign Policy - The Background', 18 January 1977.

<sup>864</sup> Arthur Collins, Interview by author, 30 June 2009; Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>865</sup> Young *British Practice, 1963-1976*, 21.

<sup>866</sup> Hill and Lord 'Foreign Policy', 312; emphasis in original.

relations, Africa, and the Middle and Far East), nor did either ‘take it up as a cause’<sup>867</sup> in addition to these central foreign policy concerns of the day.

Instead, in order to formulate Britain’s position during the conflict (with the exception of non-intervention which was adopted from the outset), the government’s most senior officials appeared to rely on situation reports, regional interest assessments, and policy briefs formulated by civil servants at the Foreign Office, and particularly those at the South Asia Department, who in turn, based their conclusions on the content and (contradictory) nature of reports from the region. In many cases, diplomatic intelligence reports and SAD briefs reached the Foreign Secretary or Prime Minister largely unaltered, reproduced in parts, or at the very least, faithfully summarised. Hence, as Edward Playfair aptly concluded, ‘There is no simple answer to the question how decisions are made. In the last resort it is a Minister who makes them, because at a crucial point he goes off without the civil servant to the Cabinet and to Parliament....But the formation of policy is a joint effort—the result of constant discussion’.<sup>868</sup> This discussion, in 1971, appears to have taken place between ministers, senior and junior civil servants and regional diplomats, rendering policy making for the most part (in this case where no leading official displayed explicit interest in matters), a fluid and collective process. Helen McCarthy’s observation (albeit with reference to British foreign policy in an earlier period) aptly describes this situation as one ‘constituted...by networks of information and knowledge creation and exchange’, that is ‘a larger, dynamic system through which knowledge about international politics and foreign societies is generated, circulated, and eventually fed into policy decision making’.<sup>869</sup>

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<sup>867</sup> Ian McCluney, Interview by author, 26 September 2009.

<sup>868</sup> Extract by Sir Edward Playfair, in *Documents on Contemporary British Government*, 181.

<sup>869</sup> Helen McCarthy, review of *On the Fringes of Diplomacy: Influences on British Foreign Policy, 1800-1945*, eds. Anthony Best and John Fisher (2011), in *Reviews of History*, 1 February 2012 <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1210> (last accessed 12 May 2012).

Yet, the matter cannot be left there, for in addition to the influence of the civil service—there was also the effect of public opinion, press and parliamentary comment, as well as the turbulent socio-economic conditions of the era. Complicating matters further, was the factor of ‘unconscious assumptions’<sup>870</sup> and ‘unconscious motivations’<sup>871</sup> of government actors that, without doubt, had some effect (leading them, for example, to implicitly view analogies to the crisis, such as the Biafra conflict, as a deterrent to action). As Bloch astutely observed, ‘To read certain books of history, one might think mankind made up entirely of logical wills whose reasons for acting would never hold the slightest mystery for them....We should seriously misrepresent the problem of causes in history if we always and everywhere reduced them to a problem of motive’.<sup>872</sup> A plethora of factors, in other words, went into ministerial decisions during the East Pakistan crisis with the influence of the civil service being perhaps uniquely evident in what was a matter of medium-scale importance for the government as a whole.

This semi-reactive approach to events may be symptomatic of British governments in general, which some civil servants maintain, are inclined to react to problems as they arise rather than work to an overarching policy. The Heath administration, in particular, appeared to prefer a ‘problem-solving approach’<sup>873</sup> to an ideological one. Heath, according to his principle private secretary, “had a vision of what he wanted to achieve, but I don’t know that he would have set it out as a set of principles. A series of thing happened and he responded to them, as a matter of necessity”.<sup>874</sup> As a result, the administration did not necessarily have a unified strategy

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<sup>870</sup> Patrick Finney, ‘Introduction: what is International History’ in *Palgrave Advances in International History*, ed. Patrick Finney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 10.

<sup>871</sup> Berger, Feldner and Passmore point out that such a concept, once considered ‘modish’ by early 20<sup>th</sup> century historians, has now passed into ‘common sense’ (*Writing History: Theory and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), preface xi).

<sup>872</sup> Bloch *The Historian’s Craft*, 161.

<sup>873</sup> Ramsden ‘Prime Minister’, 27.

<sup>874</sup> Robert Armstrong, as quoted in Ramsden ‘Prime Minister’, 27.

with which to approach the various international and domestic issues that arose within months of their taking office.<sup>875</sup>

For the former head of the Foreign Office, Guy Millard, this constituted a “central dilemma” for the state: “One of our troubles is that we lack what one might call a philosophy of foreign policy. To a large extent we go on answering telegrams without having any very clear idea of where exactly we want to get to...we do not know what our national ends are supposed to be. This lack of philosophy is more marked now than before”.<sup>876</sup> Interestingly, while British responses to the East Pakistan crisis in 1971 appear largely to have been influenced by immediate circumstances related to the event, in this case, it did not prevent the government from obtaining a relatively successful outcome. Evidence of an ad hoc or reactive approach thus does not imply a strategic fault here, so much as it renders any discussion of a predetermined British ‘policy’ during the period limited, and supports those who claim that the country’s foreign policy practitioners tend ‘to eschew conceptualisation and to emphasise empirical adjustment (which some might call “muddling though” and others “pragmatism”)’.<sup>877</sup>

As a result of its varied approach, Britain managed to negotiate the diplomatic minefield and international instability posed by the affair with its regional interests and reputation intact. Britain’s responses to the Pakistan crisis may thus be perceived, on the one hand, as a praiseworthy example of diplomatic deftness, or on the other, as evidence of the ‘moral bankruptcy’<sup>878</sup> of state actors who become bystanders to terror. In truth, British responses, which reflect apathy, political realism and humanitarian concern, fall somewhere between these two perspectives, rendering incomplete any account that highlights one aspect over another. Britain’s responses to the East Pakistan

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<sup>875</sup> Ramsden ‘Prime Minister’, 23-27.

<sup>876</sup> Millard, as quoted in Beck *Using History*, 238. Frank Cooper, a senior Ministry of Defence official from 1964-1971, makes a similar observation in ‘The Decision to Withdraw from East of Suez’ (ICBH Witness Seminar), 20.

<sup>877</sup> Hill and Lord ‘The Foreign Policy’, 288.

<sup>878</sup> Wheeler *Saving Strangers*, 52.

crisis, in other words, do not sit well with the judgements issued to date of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. What is necessary rather, are textured accounts which, as this thesis has attempted to do, delve into Britain’s perceptions of and responses to the violence, unpacking how the concepts of ‘civil war’ and ‘genocide’ were being contemplated, interpreted and employed by government officials—both those on the ground, and behind the closed doors of policy makers, to reveal the ambiguities that characterised both the conflict, and British responses.

This uneasy situation reflects Britain’s peculiar position in the early 1970s, as a state apparently ready to accept its middle-ranking status, but at the same time, hankering to retain international credentials. The foreign policy of the Heath government is indicative of this dualism. For Heath may have spoken of a Britain with strong global commitments, and he may have overturned some of his predecessors’ policies of retrenchment, but these gestures turned out to be cosmetic. In reality, whether they had intended to or not, the Conservative government was obliged to continue the process of decolonization that had begun with the dismantling of British India in 1947, and continued in earnest in the 1960s after the Suez debacle. Britain by the early 1970s, if not entirely in principle, was in practice, a second-ranking power.

David Reynolds in *Britannia Overruled* observes, ‘As historians our first question should not be “What’s the problem?” but “What’s the story”, for Britain’s *story* is a distinctive one’.<sup>879</sup> The dualism of the Heath era aptly demonstrates just how distinctive it has been. And whereas, for Reynolds, the central motifs of the twentieth century are one of ‘decline, revival and fall’,<sup>880</sup> the limited time span of this study on British foreign policy towards South Asia in 1971 reflects decline but also moderate determination. Such a perspective falls largely into what Anthony Seldon labels the ‘contingencies’ view of the Heath government, that is the ‘good intentions, fair strategy,

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<sup>879</sup> Reynolds *Britannia Overruled*, 306; emphasis in original.

<sup>880</sup> Reynolds *Britannia Overruled*, 309.

hostile environment' view, which contends that the government achieved some successes, but was largely thrown off course because of 'circumstances beyond its control'.<sup>881</sup> This is contested by the 'Thatcherite' camp that declares Heath's Conservatives to have been a failure, having reneged on their (possibly insincere) international promises in order to focus on the country's back garden that, ultimately, they did not know how to tend.<sup>882</sup> The government's approach to the East Pakistan secession crisis, from the perspective of British history, counters this view with a case where the government was reasonably successful in the international sphere. Of course British responses to this episode of mass nationalist violence cannot only be described in terms of success, there was also an element of denial; the 'story', as it were, is considerably gradated and defies easy judgement. As such, while the perspectives described above are useful, the analysis of the Heath government in this thesis does not fall neatly into any one of them.

This discomfiting state of affairs relates not only to the specifics of British government during the period, but also, in part, to the ambiguous nature of the East Pakistan conflict itself, in which 'there was organization and planning...but there were also local acts of violence carried out for a multiplicity of reasons and motives that were not genocidal in intent'.<sup>883</sup> As any account of twentieth century conflict demonstrates, such instances of composite violence are frequent; indeed, much more so than one-sided premeditated attacks on innocents. State-endorsed atrocities in Rwanda in 1994 and in Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, to name two prominent examples, also occurred amidst civil war and encompassed acts of violence perpetrated by an array of participants.<sup>884</sup> Those who assess such complex episodes in history, therefore, have the

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<sup>881</sup> Seldon 'Heath Government', 2, 10-13.

<sup>882</sup> See Seldon 'Heath Government', 13-19.

<sup>883</sup> Paul Brass here is describing reciprocal acts of violence committed by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs at the 1947-48 partition of Punjab ('Retributive Genocide', 72).

<sup>884</sup> Benjamin Valentino, for example, notes that while systematic atrocities in Bosnia are widely viewed as ethnic cleansing while those in Rwanda as genocide, both were carried out with additional

task of unravelling the various dimensions of violence, and judiciously attributing responsibility to the different parties who are involved. Doing so does not necessarily mean equating acts of violence in terms of quality or scale, nor does it mean distributing responsibility equally among those who engage in violence, or among those who observe it.

Bangladesh, today under the political leadership of the pro-independence Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, the eldest surviving daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has commenced war crimes proceedings comparable to those initiated by her father after the country's independence. Unlike the trials proposed for members of the Pakistani army in 1972, however, current proceedings are directed against Bengalis accused of collaborating with Pakistani authorities to commit war crimes, including genocide and crimes against humanity. The country's efforts to administer justice through the framework of a war crimes tribunal have generated a great deal of international attention and discussion over this contentious and under-researched episode of violence, and as such, may provide impetus for deeper inquiry.<sup>885</sup> However, there are serious concerns over the tribunal's legality. To date all of the defendants charged are leading figures of the political opposition. The statute of the tribunal, known as the '1973 International Crimes (Tribunal) Act', sanctions the death penalty and, according to many legal observers, has major shortcomings with regards to fair trial and due process. It displays, moreover, numerous violations of the principle of legality: 'the universally recognised requirement that criminal laws be clear and people are not prosecuted for what was not criminal at the time that the acts were

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'counterguerrilla' motives. See his chart 'Ethnic Mass Killings in the Twentieth Century' in *Mass Killing*, 77.

<sup>885</sup> See for example, 'Answering for History: Bangladesh responds to criticism of its plans to try war criminals', *The Economist*, 16 December 2010; 'War Crimes and Misdemeanours. Justice, Reconciliation—or Score-settling?' *The Economist*, 24 March 2011; 'Bangladesh court begins first war crimes trial', *Jurist Legal News and Research*, 10 August 2011, <http://jurist.org/paperchase/2011/08/bangladesh-court-begins-first-war-crimes-trial.php> (last accessed 12 August 2011); John Cammegh, 'The Bangladesh war crimes tribunal: reconciliation or revenge?' *Crimes of War Project Website*, n. d. November 2011, <http://www.crimesofwar.org/commentary/the-bangladesh-war-crimes-tribunal-reconciliation-or-revenge-2/> (last accessed 27 May 2012).



committed'.<sup>886</sup> Bangladeshi legislation, in other words, is highly irregular and fails to meet international standards on many counts.<sup>887</sup> While attempts are apparently being made to update procedures (with the International Criminal Court as guidance), as it stands, the tribunal resembles a political instrument aimed at achieving retribution and consolidating power, rather than a vehicle for facilitating justice and assessing responsibility for the mass killing and atrocities committed in 1971.

Polemics will always pose a challenge to understanding the past; so too, of course, will lack of historical observation and critical analysis. Examining Britain's perceptions of and responses to the East Pakistan crisis, based largely on British diplomatic files—is, at the core, an attempt to contribute to the historical record of two countries. It is widely acknowledged amongst historians that arriving at a finite or ultimate history—that is, 'the Truth' is not possible. What is considered fact today will, following the uncovering of new facts, or when compared to those that are already known, precipitate fresh understanding. Such is the cycle of historical research, which is essentially a collective pool of knowledge, seemingly without end. 'Historians expect their work to be superseded again and again: "They consider that knowledge of the past has come down through one or more human minds, has been 'processed' by them".'<sup>888</sup> 'The past is, by definition, a datum which nothing in the future will change. But the knowledge of the past is something progressive which is constantly transforming and perfecting itself'.<sup>889</sup> In the case of Britain at the birth of Bangladesh, the past is now beginning to be uncovered. It is hoped that the exhaustive analysis of events presented in this thesis will serve as a cornerstone on the path to further knowledge.

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<sup>886</sup> Katherine Iliopoulos, 'Bangladesh: A Free and Fair War Crimes Tribunal?' *Crimes of War Project Website*, 26 August 2010, <http://www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/news-bangladesh.html> (last accessed 24 Mar 2011).

<sup>887</sup> For a useful wide-ranging examination of these issues, see Suzannah Linton, 'Completing the Circle: Accountability for the Crimes of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation', *Criminal Law Forum*, vol. 21 (2010): 191-311.

<sup>888</sup> Ovendale quoting Sir George Clark in *British Defence*, 3.

<sup>889</sup> Bloch *The Historian's Craft*, 48.

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## **APPENDIX**



## LIST OF DOCUMENTS

- DOC 1a:** *The Prime Minister's 'Pakistan Situation Report' (page 1), 28 March 1971.*
- DOC 1b:** *The Prime Minister's 'Pakistan Situation Report' (page 2), 28 March 1971.*
- DOC 2:** *Telegram 412 'East Pakistan', Islamabad to FCO, 29 March 1971.*
- DOC 3a:** *The Prime Minister's 'Pakistan Situation Report' (page 1), 7 April 1971.*
- DOC 3b:** *The Prime Minister's 'Pakistan Situation Report' (page 2), 7 April 1971.*
- DOC 4:** *The Prime Minister's 'Pakistan Situation Report', 20 April 1971.*
- DOC 5:** *Telegram 421 'High Commissioner: East Pakistan', Dacca—FCO, 19 May 1971.*
- DOC 6:** *Telegram 'Conditions in East Pakistan', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 14 June 1971.*
- DOC 7:** *Telegram 'Army Operations in E.P.', Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 19 June 1971.*
- DOC 8:** *The Sunday Times (London), 13 June 1971.*
- DOC 9a:** *Early Day Motion 592 'Genocide in East Bengal and the Recognition of Bangladesh' (page 1), 15 June 1971.*
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- DOC 10a:** *Internal legal opinion 'Pakistan: The Genocide Convention' (page 1), FCO UN Economic & Social Dept—SAD, 17 June 1971.*
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- DOC 11a:** *'Notes for Supplementaries' (page 1), prepared for the Foreign Secretary's use in the House of Commons on 23 June 1971.*
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- DOC 13a:** *Report 'Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan' (page 1), Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 29 November 1971.*
- DOC 13b:** *Report 'Conduct of the Army in East Pakistan' (page 2), Dacca—Islamabad and FCO, 29 November 1971.*
- DOC 14:** *Telegram 929, 18 December 1971, Dacca—FCO.*
- DOC 15a:** *Text of Edward Heath's message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 445, FCO—Islamabad, 7 April 1971.*

**DOC 15b:** *Text of Edward Heath's message to Yahya Khan in Telegram 445, FCO—Islamabad, 7 April 1971.*

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**DOC 16b:** *Telegram 1372 (page 2), Islamabad—FCO, 3 July 1971.*

**DOC 17:** *Telegram 765, Islamabad—FCO, 6 May 1971.*

**DOC 18:** *Letter, FCO—10 Downing St, 10 June 1971.*

**DOC 19:** *Secret Telegram 1421 'Trial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman', FCO—Islamabad, 6 August 1971.*

**DOC 20:** *Secret Telegram 1111, FCO—UK Mission to the UN, New York, 8 December 1971.*

**DOC 21:** *Text of Edward Heath's message to Z. A. Bhutto in Telegram 2402, 28 December 1971.*

**DOC 22a:** *Letter, (page 1), Dacca—FCO, 14 April 1971.*

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**DOC 23:** *British Parliamentary Delegation with Indira Gandhi, July 1971.*

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Edward Heath's handwritten annotation: 'Is FCO getting accounts directly from refugees who have arrived in the UK? They should do so immediately.'

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**DOC 23:** *British Parliamentary Delegation with Indira Gandhi, July 1971. From left to right: Arthur Bottomley, Toby Jessel, Reginald Prentice and Terrence Garvey (British High Commissioner to India). Source: Jessel, Private Papers.*